

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Vol. 5 No. 1

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Romances



SPECIAL THIS MONTH
REUNITED LOVERS:
SEPARATED BY
CIRCUMSTANCES...
BROUGHT TOGETHER
BY LOVE

Yesterday Once More
Seize the Fire
Designing Woman
Lovers' Reunion

DEBBIE MACOMBER
ELDA MINGER
CANDACE SCHULER
TERRI HERRINGTON



DEBBIE MACOMBER

Debbie Macomber hails from the state of Washington. As a busy wife and mother of four, she strives to keep her family healthy and happy. As a prolific author of dozens of bestselling romance novels, she strives to keep her readers happy with each new book she writes.

ELDA MINGER

Elda Minger became a writer via a circuitous route. Through the years, she has worked in several bookstores, cleaned houses in Beverly Hills, ushered in theaters, sung for her supper on Hollywood Boulevard and even appeared in two movies. A gypsy at heart, Elda has lived throughout the United States and Europe. She currently enjoys life in Palm Springs, California. When she's not writing, she's usually either gardening, dreaming, fooling around or at the movies.



CANDACE SCHULER

Candace Schuler was born in Santa Cruz, California, and grew up between the seaside and a small family farm across the bay from San Francisco. Since she and her husband first met, the two of them have traveled extensively. When she's not writing or traveling, Candace likes to relax by reading, doing cross-stitch or taking adult education classes.

TERRI HERRINGTON

Terri Herrington is the award-winning author of nearly twenty novels for Harlequin and Silhouette, as well as three mainstream single titles. She lives with her husband and two daughters in Mississippi, but she has lived in eight states and spent part of her childhood in Holland. She thinks that falling in love is the most special feeling in the world, one that she experiences each time she writes or reads a romance.



HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

As we grow older, we all occasionally think of what might have been—that boy I liked in high school, that prom date, that big weekend in college—and muse on what happened to those people who once seemed the answer to the dating prayer.

Giving first loves a second chance awaits in this month's volume of the World's Best Romances, so when the sun sets and the air is still, I plan to be swept away as...lovers are reunited years after being torn apart by "circumstances"...two kindred hearts decide an affair is in order—will they discover just how much deeper their feelings for each other are?...a sweet and shy beauty decides that the man she truly loves, but left behind, is really worth fighting for...and a fifteenth high school reunion turns out to be the perfect romance setting for a love turned to ashes to once again be rekindled into flames!

Let this month's volume of the World's Best Romances help take away the summer heat and fill your heart with a special kind of warmth!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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DEBBIE MACOMBER

Yesterday Once More



Daniel Van Deen's mother, Clara, had so interfered with his and Julie Houser's lives and wedding plans that Julie broke their engagement and left town. Three years later, she is hoping to make amends, and this time Clara needs *her* help.



Julie Houser pushed the elevator button and stepped back to wait, absently glancing at her watch; she'd have plenty of time to finish unpacking tonight.

The giant metal doors swooshed open and Julie moved right to the rear, anticipating the five-thirty rush. By the time the car reached the bottom floor it would be full.

The next floor down it stopped again. This time three men boarded, then another.

As Julie squeezed into the far corner, her purse strap slid off her shoulder. Easing it back up, she felt someone's eyes roam over her. Accustomed to the appreciative gaze of men, Julie at first ignored the man. But after one look at her admirer, she nearly choked.

"Daniel." The name slipped from her lips as their eyes met and held. His dark eyes narrowed, an impassive expression masking his handsome features.

Unable to bear his gaze any longer, Julie lowered her eyes.

The elevator stopped and everyone filed out until she stood alone in the empty shell, her breath coming in deep, uneven gasps. So soon? She'd only been back to Wichita six days. To see Daniel so quickly! And in her own building. Was his office here? *Oh, please*, she begged, *not yet. I'm not ready.*

The downtown sidewalks were filled with people and Julie weaved her way through the crowds. Ten minutes later

her hand trembled uncontrollably as she unlocked her car door.

Her heart felt as if she'd been running a marathon as she slipped into the driver's seat. Three long years had passed since she'd seen Daniel. Years of change. She'd only been nineteen when she'd fled in panic. The regret she felt for hurting the man she loved so intensely was almost more than she could bear. And she had loved Daniel. The evening he'd slipped the diamond engagement ring on her finger had been the happiest of her young life.

Julie let her thoughts drift back to that night as she started her car. Daniel had taken her to an elegant French restaurant. Flickering candlelight had sent shadows dancing over the white linen tablecloth.

"Happy?" he asked.

Julie glanced over the top of the gold-tasseled menu and nodded shyly.

Daniel set his menu aside. Julie noticed that from the moment he'd picked her up that evening he'd been unnaturally quiet.

"Daniel, is something the matter?" she ventured.

He stared at her blankly and shook his head.

"I'm not wearing the right kind of dress, am I?" She'd changed outfits three times before he'd arrived.

"You're beautiful," Daniel whispered. "Is it any wonder I love you so?" He reached for her hand, gripping her fingers with his on top of the table. "I've been trying to find a way to ask you a question."

"But, Daniel, all you need to do is ask."

He sighed. "It's not that simple, my love."

Julie couldn't imagine what was troubling him.

"I've been accepted into the law practice of McFife, Lawson and Garrison."

Julie smiled. "That's wonderful news. Congratulations."

"It's only a junior partnership."

"But, Daniel, that is the firm you were hoping would accept you."

"Yes, it is, for more reasons than you know."

"We're here to celebrate, then."

"Not quite yet." He leaned forward and clasped her hand with both of his. "Honey, these last months have been the happiest of my life."

"Mine, too," she whispered.

"I know you're only nineteen, and I probably should wait a couple of years..."

Julie's heart was pounding so loudly she was afraid he could hear it. "Yes, Daniel?"

"What I'm trying to say is... I love you, Julie. Now that I can offer you a future, I'm asking you to marry me."

Julie bit into her bottom lip, convinced if she said anything, she'd start to cry.

"Julie," he pleaded.

She nodded wildly.

"Does that mean yes?"

The words trembled from her lips.

"Yes, Daniel, yes! I love you so much. I can't think of anything that would make me happier than to spend the rest of my life with you."

The loving look in Daniel's eyes was enough to melt her bones. He pulled a jeweler's box from his pocket. He

opened the lid and the size of the diamond made Julie gasp.

"Oh, Daniel." Unbidden tears blurred her gaze. "It's the most beautiful ring I've ever seen."

"Here." He slowly slipped the diamond onto her finger, his eyes alight with a heart full of love.

Battling to put an end to the memories, Julie pulled into the apartment parking lot and sat for several moments. She toyed with the gold chain around her slender neck, seeking the diamond. She would keep the engagement ring there until it was back on her finger where it belonged. But after seeing Daniel today, Julie realized how difficult the task was going to be. He wouldn't forgive her easily.

The most difficult decision she'd ever made was to flee Wichita three years ago. The second hardest was to come back. But love had demanded that she return and set things right—if possible.

When she reached her apartment, Julie hung her purse on the bedroom doorknob and placed her coat in the closet. Several large boxes littered the living room floor, but she felt exhausted, and it had nothing to do with physical exertion.

Everything had happened just as she'd hoped. The job had been lined up even before the move, then she'd located an apartment within her budget. But inadvertently running into Daniel so soon seemed unreal.

She located the box that held their engagement portrait and stared at the two smiling faces. They'd been so much in love. Tears filled her eyes as her fingers lovingly traced Daniel's face. He looked more mature now. Even the sandy-colored hair that had always seemed wind tousled was ur-

banelly styled. The powerful male features were more pronounced now. Her finger idly moved over the lean, proud jaw and paused at the tiny cleft in his chin.

She had loved to kiss him there. To tease him unmercifully with her lips. And he had been so wonderful. Conscience of her innocence, Daniel had held his desire in a tight rein. Julie wondered if he regretted that now.

EARLY THE NEXT morning Julie arrived at work intent on checking the occupant listings of the office complex. Daniel Van Deen, Attorney, seemed to leap off the register at her. Only one floor separated them. For five of the six days she'd been in Wichita they'd crossed paths without even knowing it.

Unexpectedly a tingling sensation swept through her, and she didn't need to be told that Daniel had entered the building. Slowly she turned her head to see him walk to the elevator. Stepping inside, he turned around. Their eyes locked.

Shivering, she watched an angry frustration sweep over his features. His magnetic dark eyes narrowed as he stared back at her. Then the door glided shut.

Julie released a quivering breath. Daniel's look said he hadn't forgotten or forgiven her.

Her legs felt unsteady as she rode up to the office of Cheney Trust and Mortgage Company. Grateful that she was first in, Julie sat at her desk, striving to regain her usual poise.

Sherry Adams, a pert blonde, strolled in about fifteen minutes late. Their employer, Jack Barrett, had arrived earlier and pointedly stared at her empty desk. Julie had only been

working there a few days, and although Sherry had her faults, it was easy to see that the young woman was a valuable asset.

"Morning," Julie responded to her co-worker.

"Did Mr. Barrett say anything about me being late?" she asked, but didn't look concerned.

"Not to me he didn't."

"One of these days, old Barrett is going to fire me."

"I doubt that," Julie commented.

The remainder of the morning was peaceful. The two women took turns answering the phone. Julie still relied on Sherry for help, which she supplied willingly.

A couple of minutes after noon, Jack Barrett strolled into the outer room. "Are you going out for lunch?" he asked Julie.

"Shall I get you something?" she asked.

"Not today." He handed her a large manila envelope. "But would you mind dropping this off at Daniel Van Deen's office?"

Julie forced a smile and walked out. The palms of her hands felt clammy as she entered Daniel's plush office.

A round-faced secretary glanced up and smiled. "Can I help you?"

"I... have an envelope from Jack Barrett," she managed.

"Agnes, did you find—" Abruptly, Daniel stopped midsentence when he saw Julie. The hard look in his eyes was solely for her.

Then unexpectedly his gaze softened and an emotion Julie couldn't define came over his features.

"Mr. Barrett sent the papers you asked about this morning," Agnes supplied, and her sharp gaze went first

to Julie then to Daniel. "Was that all?"

"Pardon?" Julie tore her attention from him.

"Was there something else?"

"No," she mumbled. "Thank you."

A puzzled look marred the woman's brow. "Thank you for bringing them," she murmured.

Julie left the office with her head held high.

The remainder of the day passed in a blur and by the time she returned home that night, Julie felt drained. She decided to call her mother.

Margaret Houser lived in a retirement community in Southern California. None of Julie's family was in Wichita anymore.

"Have you looked up any of your old high school friends?" her mother asked.

"Not yet." Actually Julie doubted that she would. "Mom." She took a deep breath. "I've seen Daniel."

Instantly her mother was concerned. "How is he?"

"We... we haven't talked. But he's changed. He's not likely to understand why I came back."

"Don't be so sure, sweetheart," Margaret said. "He's been hurt, and the years are bound to have changed him."

"Mom, I don't think he will talk to me."

"I've never known you to be a defeatist," her mother said. "But I worry about Daniel's mother. Be careful of her."

"I will." Idly Julie's fingers flipped through the white pages of the telephone directory after she'd hung up. Clara Van Deen's phone was unlisted. But Daniel's was there.

From the beginning, Julie had known that Daniel's mother wanted him to marry a more socially prominent girl. But to her credit, Clara Van Deen accepted Julie as Daniel's choice. Then she set about making her into something she would never be. Clara had Julie's hair cut and styled, then she purchased an entire wardrobe for her.

Julie swallowed her pride a hundred times and tried to do exactly as Mrs. Van Deen wished. She did so want to make Daniel proud.

But the wedding plans were what had finally caused Julie to buckle and run. She had wanted a simple ceremony with only their immediate families. Daniel's mother issued invitations to four hundred close and intimate friends she couldn't possibly insult by not inviting.

"But, Daniel," Julie had protested, "I don't know any of these people."

"Don't worry about it," Daniel had said. "They'll love you as much as I do."

Daniel had negated any further protests with a searing kiss that had left Julie too weak to argue.

As the date drew closer, Julie was the focus of attention at a variety of teas and social events.

After each one, Mrs. Van Deen would run through a list of taboos that Julie had violated. No matter how hard Julie tried, there was always something she'd done wrong or shouldn't have said. Someone she might have offended.

"I can't take it anymore," Julie cried to her mother at last.

"Say something," her mother advised.

"Don't you think I've tried?" Julie shouted.

Every day the pressure mounted. The whole wedding had grown into a monster that loomed ready to devour Julie. The caterers, musicians, soloist, organist. The flower girl, the dresses, the bridesmaids. Mrs. Van Deen even booked their honeymoon.

"Daniel, please listen to me," Julie had begged a week before the wedding. "I don't want any of this."

"Honey, I know you're nervous," he'd whispered. "But everything will be over in one day and we can go on with the rest of our lives as we wish."

But Julie doubted that they could. Her suspicions were confirmed when Mrs. Van Deen made a large down payment on a house for them.

"It's her wedding gift to us," Daniel explained. But the house was only a few minutes from his mother's, and the handwriting was bold and clear on the freshly painted walls.

"Doesn't it bother you the way she's taken over our lives?"

In that second, she saw that Daniel did care, but would do nothing.

"For the first time since Dad died, my mother's got a purpose. She's loving every minute of it. Can't you see the difference our wedding has made in her?"

All Julie could feel was a growing case of claustrophobia. That night she couldn't sleep. By early the next morning, she had packed her bags.

"You can't do this," Margaret Houser argued.

"I've got to," Julie cried, her eyes red. "I'm not marrying Daniel. I'm marrying his mother."

"But the wedding's in five days."

"There will be no wedding," Julie replied.

"But Julie—"

"I know what you're going to say," she interrupted. "This is far more than pre-wedding jitters."

"Talk to Daniel, dear. Explain how you feel. At least do that much."

Julie went to Daniel's office. They met as he was on his way out the door.

"I need to talk to you." Her hands were clenched tightly in front of her.

Daniel glanced at his watch. "Honey, can't it wait?"

"No." She shook her head. "It can't wait."

Daniel led her into his office. "All right, honey, I know things have been hectic lately, but it's bound to get better once we're married. We'll have lots of time together then, I promise."

"That's just it, Daniel," Julie informed him. "We aren't going to be married."

Daniel inhaled sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I can't marry you, Daniel." She slipped the diamond off and held it out to him in the palm of her hand.

"Julie!" He was stunned. "I don't understand."

"I don't imagine you do." Julie bowed her head. "Do you remember last week when I suggested we drive across the border and get married? You laughed." Her voice wobbled. "But I was dead serious."

"Mother would never forgive us if we did something like that."

Julie released a short, harsh breath. "That's just the point. You wouldn't dream of crossing your mother, but it doesn't seem to matter what all this is doing to me."

"But she loves you."

"She loves the woman she's created. I'm slowly being molded into what she thinks is the picture of the

right woman for you. I've had it. I can't take it anymore."

"Why don't you stand up to her?" Daniel said.

"Do you think I haven't tried? But no one listens to me. Not even you, Daniel. I'm...not sure how I feel about you anymore."

"Is that so?" He exhaled a sharp breath.

"That's right," Julie insisted huskily. "I want out. Here." Again she tried to return the ring.

For an agonizing moment Daniel stared at her and then the ring. Then he stalked to the far side of the room and looked out the window, his back to her. "Keep it."

"But Daniel," she pleaded.

"I said keep it," he grated. When he turned around, his mouth was a rigid line. The piercing dark eyes clouded with pain. "Now get out of my life and stay out."

That had been three years ago. She'd driven to her aunt's home in California. Every night since, she'd wondered if she'd done the right thing.

Now she'd come back to ask Daniel's and Mrs. Van Deen's forgiveness. She wouldn't leave without it.

*

THE NEXT morning Julie stood inside the Inland Empire foyer and waited until Daniel entered the building. She longed to talk to him.

When she saw him advance toward the elevator, she moved behind him so that when the metal doors opened she could enter, too. But there were two others.

If Daniel was aware of her presence he refused to react. But Julie had never been more aware of anyone in her life. Daniel's tall, handsome figure, loom-

ing beside her, seemed to fill the elevator. The years had been good to him. He'd been boyishly good-looking three years ago; now he was devastating.

The two strangers exited on the fifth floor and a surprised Julie found herself alone with Daniel. This was exactly what she'd planned, yet her tongue felt uncooperative.

"Hello, Daniel," she managed, but he ignored her, staring straight ahead.

"We need to talk." Her voice was a whisper.

Silence. She noted the way his mouth twisted into a hard line as he turned to look away from her.

Gently she laid her hand on his forearm. But the hopelessness of the situation overwhelmed her. As stinging tears filled her eyes, the tall figure became a watery blur, and Julie dropped her hand. The elevator stopped and he left. Daniel had refused to look at her.

WHEN JULIE woke Saturday morning the sun was shining and the early spring day was much too beautiful to spend indoors. She recalled how Daniel's mother loved to work in her flower garden. Clara Van Deen had grown the most gorgeous irises.

Julie's intention had been to drive to the paint store, but instead she found herself on the street that led to Clara's house.

She pulled to a stop across the street and stared at the lovely two-story home with its landscaped front yard. A fancy sports car was parked in the driveway. Julie doubted it was Mrs. Van Deen's and debated whether she should gather her courage and approach Mrs. Van Deen.

But no. Now wasn't the time. Not when she was dressed in jeans and a

sweatshirt. When she faced Mrs. Van Deen she would need to look and feel her best. She shifted gears and headed for the shopping center.

The paint she chose for the living room was an antique white that was sure to cheer the drab room. She actually looked forward to spending a quiet afternoon painting.

First she took down the drapes and carefully laid them across the back of the sofa. Intent on spreading out newspapers, she jerked upright as the sound of the doorbell caught her off guard.

Daniel's tall figure filled the doorway. The look on his face sent a cold shaft of apprehension through her.

"Leave my mother alone."

Julie stared at him.

"I saw you this morning parked in front of her house. Stay away, Julie, I'm warning you."

Inwardly Julie flinched, but she jutted her chin out in a gesture of defiance. "Daniel, I've come a thousand miles to talk to you and your mother."

"Then you've wasted your time. Neither of us care to see you."

Levelly, Julie met his gaze. "I've come to make amends."

"Amends? Do you think you could ever undo the humiliation I suffered when you walked out?"

"I'd like to try. A thousand times I've regretted—"

"Regretted." He turned to face her. "I used to dream you'd say that to me. Now that you have, it means nothing. I look at you and I don't feel a thing. You came back to apologize, then fine, you've made your peace. Just don't go to my mother, bringing up the past. She has no desire to see you. Whatever you and I shared is over and done with."

Julie closed her eyes at the sting in his voice. She wouldn't be easily swayed from her goal. "Oh, Daniel," she whispered. "You don't mean that."

"Does that bother you?" he asked. "You taught me a lot of things: I've blocked you from my mind, but unfortunately my mother has never been the same. I can't forgive you for what you've done to her."

"But that's the reason I've come back," she said.

He looked right through her and Julie knew he was lost to another world.

Impatiently he reiterated, "Leave my mother alone. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry," Julie hung her head. "I promise not to do anything to hurt her. Can you trust me for that, at least?"

"I shouldn't." A nerve moved in his jaw and without another word, he turned and walked out of the apartment.

Numb, Julie stood exactly where she was for what could have been a split second or a half hour. Her hands felt moist with nervous perspiration. Forcing herself into action, she opened the first gallon of paint.

Julie worked until well past midnight. When she finished, the old room was barely recognizable. The feeling of accomplishment helped lift her heavy heart. Had she thought confronting Daniel and his mother would be easy? No. She'd known what to expect.

As she worked, Julie remembered Daniel's words. Maybe contacting Clara Van Deen now could do more harm than good. Hours later, lying in bed, Julie couldn't let the thought go—2:00 a.m. and although she was physically exhausted, she hadn't been able

to sleep. Pounding her pillow, Julie rolled over and faced the wall.

Write her.

The idea flashed through her mind like a laser beam. Instantly, Julie sat up and threw back the covers and searched for a pen and pad.

A WEEK PASSED before she heard from the older woman. Her fingers shook as she took the single sheet of stationery from its envelope.

It read simply: *Saturday at four.*

"That's today." Julie spoke out loud and shot a look at the kitchen clock. Just after one. She had only three hours to prepare herself. Mrs. Van Deen had done that deliberately, hoping to catch her off guard. But Julie was prepared for this confrontation.

She chose a simple business suit of blue gabardine, the same one she'd worn to the job interview with Mr. Barrett. She wanted to show Mrs. Van Deen that she wasn't an awkward teenager any longer. At precisely four o'clock, Julie pulled into the curved driveway.

The doorbell was answered by Mrs. Batten, the elderly cook who had been with the family for years. If she recognized Julie, she said nothing.

The interior of the house hadn't changed. To her left was the salon, as Mrs. Van Deen called it. At one time Julie had thought of it as a torture chamber. To her right was a massive dining room.

"This way," Mrs. Batten instructed, and she was led through the house to the back garden.

"You may wait here." It was a heavy cast-iron chair separated from an identical one by a small table.

Fifteen minutes passed and still Julie sat alone. Then the sound of soft

footsteps behind her caused her to tense.

"Hello, Julie." The words were low and trembling.

Julie stood. Daniel's mother was frail and obviously weak. She leaned heavily upon a cane, yet she was elegant as ever, her hair completely white now. She was far thinner than Julie remembered.

"Sit down." Mrs. Van Deen motioned, and took the seat opposite her. "To say I was surprised to receive your letter would be an understatement."

"I imagine it was."

"Does Daniel know you're back?"

She nodded. "We work in the same building."

"You have a Wichita address?"

"Yes, I moved back." Her voice quavered slightly.

"Why?"

"Because—I wanted to make amends, and I didn't think I could do that if I flew in for a weekend."

"That was wise, dear."

"I came because I deeply regret my actions. I—"

"Do you still love my son?" Clara Van Deen asked.

"Yes," she admitted. "Yes, I do, but I..."

"But you hate me?"

"Oh, no. The only person I've hated over the years was myself."

The old woman's smile was wan. "There comes a time in a woman's life when she can look at things more clearly. In my life it comes as I face death. As you've probably guessed, I'm not well."

Tears filled Julie's eyes. She hadn't expected Daniel's mother to be kind or understanding.

"There's no need to cry. I've lived a full life, but my heart is weak and I

can't do much of anything these days. Ill health helps one gain perspective."

"Then you do forgive me?" Julie whispered.

Her hand tightened around the cane. "No."

Julie closed her eyes to the disappointment and hurt. "What can I do?" she asked softly.

"I want you to forgive me." Daniel's mother reached across and patted Julie's hand. "I was the reason you did what you did. All these years I've buried that guilt deep in my heart. I behaved like an interfering old woman."

Julie noticed a tear slide down the weathered cheek, followed by several more. Her own face was moist.

"We've both been fools."

"But there's no fool like an old one." Clara Van Deen wiped her cheek. She looked pale and tired, but a radiance came from her eyes.

As if on cue, Mrs. Batten carried in a silver tray with a coffeepot and two china cups.

"Tell me what you've done with yourself all this time." Mrs. Van Deen looked genuinely interested.

"I went to school for a while in California and lived with my aunt. Later my mother joined me and I got a job with a bank. Then with a trust company. Nothing very exciting."

"What about men?"

"I... dated some."

"Anyone seriously?"

Julie shook her head. "No one. What about Daniel?"

The former radiance dimmed. "He never tells me."

"He's changed."

"Yes, he has. And not for the good, I fear. He's an intense young man. Some days he reminds me of..." She paused.

"Mrs. Van Deen, are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, child. You're beginning to sound like Daniel. And please, call me Clara."

Even when engaged to Daniel, Julie had never had that privilege. It was a confirmation of their new understanding.

"All right, Clara."

"I do have regrets." The older woman looked far away. "I would so have liked to hold a grandchild."

Julie took a sip of her coffee.

"I know what it's cost you to come to me," she continued. "You have far more character than I gave you credit—" The woman's tired eyes widened and she paused. "I'm sorry, Julie, but I'm not feeling well." The older woman's hand covered her heart. "I think you should call Mrs. Batten."

Panic filled Julie. Daniel's mother was a lot more than weak and unwell. "Mrs. Batten," she cried as she ran toward the kitchen. "Call Medic One and tell them to hurry."

THE HOSPITAL was a whirlwind of activity when Julie arrived. Daniel was pacing the small waiting area. He turned toward her.

"Don't ask me to leave," she pleaded.

He rammed his fingers through his hair. "The ambulance driver told me you were responsible for calling them in time to save her life."

Julie didn't answer. Her arms cradled her stomach as she paced the enclosure with him. They didn't speak. They didn't touch. But Julie couldn't remember a closer communication with anyone.

The whole universe seemed to halt when the doctor stepped into the room. "She's resting comfortably," he announced.

"Thank God," Daniel said.

"Your mother's a stubborn woman. She insists on seeing both of you. But only take a minute."

Julie glanced at Daniel. "You go."

"Both," the doctor repeated.

Clara Van Deen looked as pale as the sheets she was lying against in the intensive care unit.

She opened her eyes and attempted to smile. "My dears," she began, "I'm so sorry to cause you all this worry."

"Rest, Mother," Daniel whispered.

"Not yet." She fluttered her eyes open. "Julie, you said you'd do anything to gain my forgiveness?"

"Yes."

"And Daniel, will you do one last thing for me?"

"Anything, you know that."

The tired old eyes closed and opened again. "My dears, won't you please marry... for my sake?"

JULIE WOKE in the gray light of early morning. She hadn't slept well and imagined Daniel hadn't, either. They'd hardly spoken as they left the hospital. The line that was Daniel's mouth revealed his feelings in the matter of any marriage between them. Words weren't necessary.

When she'd arrived home Julie had undressed and made herself a cup of strong coffee. Her thoughts were troubled and confused. Clara was so different from what she'd imagined. Julie had braced herself for a confrontation, but she'd discovered a sick, gentle woman with many regrets. Deep within her, Julie longed to ease Clara's mind. She lay facing death. She needed

the assurance that her son would be happy.

But Daniel resented her too much.

Yet she loved him, had loved him when she ran away all those years ago and, if possible, loved him even more now. Every time she looked at him, her heart ached with that love. Closing her eyes, Julie reminded herself over and over again of why she'd returned to Wichita.

EVEN AT midmorning the hospital parking lot was full. Although Julie hadn't reached a decision, she had peace in her heart. She'd talk to Daniel, and together they would decide what to do.

Daniel was in the waiting area outside the intensive care unit. He glanced up as Julie approached.

"Good morning," she said. "How's Clara?"

"My mother," he returned, "rested comfortably."

Julie took the seat opposite. "Can we talk?" Sitting on the edge of the cushion, Julie leaned forward.

"The doctor's with her now."

"Daniel." Julie found it hard to speak. "What are we going to do?"

His laughter was mirthless. "What do you mean, *do*? My mother didn't know what she was saying. They'd given her so many drugs yesterday she wasn't thinking straight. Today she won't remember."

Julie didn't believe that any more than Daniel did, but clearly he wished to avoid the issue.

They both looked up expectantly when the doctor entered the room.

"How is she?" Daniel spoke first.

"She's incredibly weak, but better than we expected." The doctor paused to study them both. "Your mother

seems to have decided she wants to live. And since she's come this far the possibilities of her making a complete recovery are good."

Julie bit her lip to keep from crying out with relief.

"She's resting now and both of you should do the same."

Daniel nodded. "I didn't want to leave until I was sure she was going to be all right."

The doctor shook his head. "I don't know what she said to you last night, but it has made the world of difference in her attitude. From that moment on, she started to recover."

Julie's eyes clashed with Daniel's.

"Now go home and get some rest. There's nothing you can do here. I'll phone you if there's any change."

"Thank you, Doctor," Daniel said.

"Can I drop you off at your place?"

Julie asked quietly. Daniel didn't look as if he should drive.

He shook his head. "No."

"You'll phone me if you hear anything?"

He nodded.

Julie didn't mean to sleep, but after arriving home she decided to stretch out on the sofa for a few minutes. The next thing she knew someone was knocking on the door.

Julie glanced at her wristwatch, shocked to see that it was after two.

"Just a minute," she called. "Who is it?" she asked before releasing the lock.

"Daniel," came the taut reply.

Julie threw open the door. "Is she all right?"

"She's doing remarkably well."

"Thank God," Julie whispered.

"I do," Daniel murmured. "Did I wake you?"

Julie nodded. "It's a good thing you did."

"They let me see her for a few minutes," he said and stood uneasily in the center of the room.

"And?" Julie prompted.

"She asked when we were planning to have the wedding."

Julie sat down. "I was afraid of that."

Daniel remained standing. "The head nurse told me she firmly believed the fact you and I are going to be married was what kept mother alive last night."

"And," Julie finished for him, "you're afraid telling her otherwise could kill her."

"I talked to the doctor again. He explained that if Mother can grow strong enough in the next few months, heart surgery might correct her condition."

"That's wonderful news."

The hard look in his dark eyes raked over her. "Yes, in some ways it's given me reason to hope. But in others..." He shook his head. "Why did you come back, Julie? Why couldn't you have left well enough alone?"

"I already explained," she answered quietly. "I need your forgiveness. I won't leave until I've accomplished that."

"You have a long wait."

"I didn't expect it to be easy."

He muttered a curse under his breath. "A marriage between us would never work. The possibility of a life together ended when you left. But my mother's health—"

"Daniel," she said. "You may find this hard to believe, but I never stopped loving you."

His eyes hardened. "If you had loved me, you would never have

walked out. You don't know what it is to love, Julie."

Her mouth trembled with the effort to restrain stinging tears. "If you honestly believe that, there's no point in having this discussion." Abruptly she stood, but he gripped her arm.

"You're marrying me, Julie, as soon as I can make the arrangements."

"I'd be crazy to marry a man like you."

His laughter was harsh. "Can you carry the guilt of my mother's death on your shoulders? Are you ready to face that, Julie? Or don't you care?"

Julie pulled herself free from his grip. "Daniel," she pleaded, "marriage is sacred."

"Not in this instance. It'll be one of convenience."

"Will it remain that way?" Her eyes sought his.

His gaze didn't flicker. "I couldn't touch you."

Julie struggled not to reveal the hurt. It shouldn't matter to her. The way he felt about her, Julie didn't want Daniel to make love to her. "And after your mother..." She couldn't speak of the possibility of Clara's death.

"You will be free to go, no strings attached. An annulment will be fairly simple."

"I don't know," Julie said. "I need time to think."

"No," Daniel said. "I need to know now."

In some ways he was right. What choice did she have? "All right, Daniel, I'll marry you, but only for your mother's sake."

Unfastening the chain from around her neck, Julie handed him her original engagement ring.

"You kept it?" He sounded shocked.

Julie gave him a gentle smile. "I couldn't bear to part with it. I wore it all these years. Close to my heart."

"It must have given you a sense of triumph to have kept it. To be honest, I'm surprised there's only one. In three years I would have expected you to add at least that many more."

"No," she answered, lowering her gaze, "there was never anyone but you."

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"It doesn't matter what you believe."

"Keep the ring around your neck. It represented a lot of devotion I don't have now. I'll buy another one."

"If that's what you want," Julie whispered.

"I'll make the arrangements and get back to you with the details."

"Fine."

JULIE'S MOTHER was shocked but pleased, and planned to fly in for the wedding. Unfortunately Margaret Houser had to get back for volunteer work the next day. Julie was relieved that her mother's stay would be cut short. She wasn't sure how effectively she could act out the role of a happy bride, but of one thing she was certain: right or wrong, she wouldn't walk out on Daniel a second time.

Daniel met Julie and her mother at the church door. His eyes roamed over the white street-length dress Julie had chosen and something unreadable flickered across his face.

His casual "Are you ready?" stirred the sense that she was making a terrible mistake, but Julie decided to ignore it.

The ceremony was short. Daniel's steady voice responded to the minis-

ter's instructions as if the words held no meaning for him. In contrast, Julie's strained speech wobbled uncontrollably.

Daniel glanced at her when she pledged her love and a glint of challenge entered his gaze.

Her fingers trembled slightly as he slipped a plain gold band on her slim finger. The simplicity of the ring suited her, but she was sure Daniel had chosen something so plain as a contrast to the beautiful diamond. Julie was confident the contrast didn't stop there.

Julie's mother hugged them both, her eyes shining. All three rode to the hospital together and were allowed a short visit with Daniel's mother.

Clara Van Deen smiled as a tear of happiness slipped from the corner of her eye.

"Trust me, Julie," she whispered. "Things will work out."

Julie nodded, smiling feebly as she kissed the wrinkled brow.

From the hospital, Daniel and Julie drove her mother to the airport. Margaret Houser insisted on paying for everyone's lunch. If she noticed the silence between the groom and bride, she said nothing.

Julie would have liked to visit longer with her mother, but Daniel was clearly in a hurry and after a few abrupt words, he ushered Julie back to the car.

Neither spoke again until Daniel had parked at his condominium. In Wichita's most prestigious downtown area, it was surprisingly spacious. The tiled entryway led to a sunken living room carpeted in a plush brown pile. Two huge picture windows overlooked the downtown area and Julie paused to admire the fantastic view from fifteen floors up.

Daniel moved around her and briskly delivered her suitcase to what was apparently to be her bedroom. He stopped outside the door in the wide hallway.

"This is your room," he called abruptly, and a glance inside confirmed that this had been a guest room. Fitting, Julie realized, since she was little more than an unwelcome guest in Daniel's life.

*

"MARRIED LIFE doesn't seem to agree with you," Sherry commented, watching Julie work.

"What do you mean?" Julie knew she wasn't doing a good job of hiding her feelings. Another week had passed and just when she thought the tension was lessening between her and Daniel something would happen to set them back. They hardly spoke in the mornings. Even during the drive downtown he was strangely quiet. In the evenings they visited his mother, came home and ate dinner. Then he'd hole up in his den. Sometimes Julie wondered if he was aware of her at all. He treated her more like a roommate than a wife. She didn't know when he slept.

"Maybe I should keep quiet," Sherry continued, "but you don't have the look of a happy bride."

Julie bit her lip. "I don't feel much like a bride."

"But why?"

A tear traced a wet trail down Julie's pale cheek. "Daniel's busy right now. I hardly see him."

Sherry rolled her chair close to Julie's and handed her friend a tissue. "Believe me," she said, "I know that feeling well. That's how all my problems with Andy started. He worked so many long hours that we didn't have

time to be a couple anymore. Eventually we drifted apart. It got to be that he was home so little that I'd been gone a week before he even knew I was missing."

Julie tried to laugh but just then their employer came out of his office. He started to say something before noticing Julie blowing her nose. He paused and quickly retreated. The two women broke into helpless giggles.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Barrett returned. "I was wondering..." he said, "would you two like to take an extra half hour for lunch today? It's been a hectic week."

"We'd love it. Right, Julie?" Sherry winked.

The long lunch with Sherry proved to be just the tonic Julie needed to raise her sagging spirits.

"You know," Sherry said between bites of her salad, "if I had to do it all over I'd make it so Andy never wanted to leave the house again."

Julie stirred her clam chowder without much interest. "How do you mean?"

"Think about it," Sherry's eyes sparkled. "We're both reasonably attractive women. There are ways for a wife to keep a husband home nights." Demurely she lowered her thick lashes. "Subtle ways, of course."

"Of course," Julie repeated, her thoughts spinning. Sherry didn't know the details of her problems with Daniel, but her co-worker was amazingly astute.

As the day progressed, Julie gave more thought to Daniel's actions. In the weeks since their wedding, Daniel had only touched and kissed her a few times and yet she'd seen the desire in his eyes. He wanted her. He spent the evenings avoiding her for fear of what

would happen. His male pride was punishing them both.

A secret smile touched Julie's eyes as she recalled the pearly white satin nightgown she'd recently admired in a department store window. Perhaps she could lure her husband to her bed without injuring either of their sensitive egos. The more she contemplated such an action, the more confident she became.

After work that evening Julie and Daniel drove silently to the hospital. Mrs. Van Deen was sitting up in bed and smiled warmly, holding out her hand to Julie.

"My dears," she murmured, "it's so good to see you."

"Mother," Daniel kissed her wrinkled cheek and held Julie close to his side.

"Julie, you're looking especially pretty."

Daniel looked at his wife as if seeing her for the first time that day. His eyes softened as he noted the way the soft pink dress molded gracefully to her. A smile touched his eyes. "She certainly does," he said.

"How are you feeling?" Julie centered her attention on Clara.

"Better," she said with a sigh. "The doctor said he'd never seen a woman make a swifter recovery. But I told him I have something to live for now. My son has the wife he's always wanted and I shall soon have the grandchildren I've dreamed about holding."

"My grandchild will have the bluest eyes," she continued, oblivious to the tension in the room. "My husband's eyes were so blue I swear they were deeper than any sea. I wish you'd known him, Julie," she continued. "He would have loved you just as I do. He was a fine man."

"I'm sure he was," Julie replied.
"A lot like Daniel."

Julie glanced up at her husband; her eyes were captured by the warmth of his look. Clara continued reminiscing about her life with August Van Deen.

When Julie and Daniel returned to the condominium that evening, she changed clothes while dinner was cooking. In tight navy blue cords and a thin sweater that outlined the ripe fullness of her breasts, she refreshed her makeup and dabbed on Daniel's favorite perfume, then returned to finish preparing dinner.

Daniel looked surprised as he joined her in the kitchen.

"I didn't want to spill anything on my dress," she told him, hiding a smile.

He nodded, but he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off her as she deftly moved around the tiny kitchen.

He didn't talk much while they ate, but that wasn't unusual. Perhaps Julie was reading too much into his actions. After so many years of living alone he could simply prefer to keep his thoughts to himself.

With seduction plots brewing in her head, she placed her plate in the dishwasher.

"I thought I was doing dishes."

"There are only a few things."

"Hey, we made a deal. When you cook, I wash the dishes," he said.
"Now scoot."

Julie sat watching television, but her mind was not on the situation comedy.

Daniel worked in the kitchen, but several times she felt his eyes rest on her.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said, bringing her a cup of fresh coffee.

"You wouldn't want to know," she teased. "You'd run in the opposite direction."

"That sounds interesting."

"I promise you it is."

Daniel surprised her by sitting beside her. "Julie." He muted the television. "Can we talk a minute?"

"Sure." She turned toward him.

"I haven't been the best of company lately."

"There's no need to apologize," she told him. "You've been working yourself half to death this last month." Crossing her legs, Julie leaned back. "And then this evening your mother started talking about grandchildren and neither one of us has the courage to tell her we aren't sharing a bed." It was on the tip of her tongue to admit how much she wanted that to change, how much she longed to be his wife in the full sense of the word and give life to his children.

"Julie, listen." His voice was filled with emotion.

The phone rang in the kitchen.

"I'll get it," Julie volunteered. Whoever it was, she'd get rid of him in a hurry. For the first time Julie felt as if they were making giant strides in their marriage. "Hello," she said.

"Who's this?" the husky female voice returned.

"Julie Van Deen," she answered.

"So it's true," came the hushed words.

"And you're...?" Julie squared her shoulders.

"Kali Morgan," the woman answered.

An icy chill raced up Julie's spine. "Would you like to talk to Daniel?"

Kali paused. "No. Just... give him my best... to you both."

"Thank you." Julie replaced the phone.

"Who was it?" Daniel was looking at her.

Twisting around, Julie clasped her hands together behind her back.

"Someone named Kali Morgan who obviously didn't know you had a wife."

Slowly Daniel took a step toward her. "Julie, don't look at me like that."

Paralysis gripped her throat as she moved down the hall. The bag containing her lovely new nightgown rested on her bed. She stared at it in disbelief. Only minutes before she'd plotted to seduce her husband.

Daniel followed her. "Julie, be reasonable. Surely you didn't think I've lived the last few years like a priest."

Everything went incredibly still as hot tears filled her eyes. "For three years my heart grieved for you until I couldn't take it anymore...and I came back because...facing your bitterness was easier than trying to forget you."

"Julie." His voice took on a soft, pleading quality. "Kali and I had been dating for several months," he said. "But she's in the past. I haven't touched her since the day I saw you in the elevator."

"Touched her," Julie repeated. "Is that supposed to reassure me? You haven't touched me, either!"

"What did you expect me to do the rest of my life?" Daniel shouted. "You walked out on me!"

Julie raked her eyes over him with open disdain. "You didn't tell her we were married! And...and all these years I've loved you until coming back was better than facing life without you."

"Don't tell me that there hasn't been anyone in—"

"Yes," she shouted. "I seldom dated. You were the only man I could ever love."

"Julie," he pleaded softly, a gentle hand on each shoulder.

"Don't touch me," she shouted, and shrugged to break his light hold. "You must find me incredibly stupid to have cherished the belief you still care." She abruptly turned from him.

He pulled her into his arms. "You're going to listen to me, Julie. Perhaps for the first time since we met, we're going to have an honest discussion."

Julie was in no mood to be reasonable. "No," she cried. Grabbing the package from her bed, she shoved it at him. "Here. Once I'm gone you might find this useful for one of your other women." With that she slammed the door, and collapsed into tears.

DANIEL was already in his den when Julie returned next evening. Clara had let it slip that her son had been by earlier to visit. Her astute mother-in-law studied the dark shadows under Julie's eyes, but didn't comment. Julie was grateful.

Hanging up her jacket, she headed for the kitchen. A package of veal cutlets rested on the countertop.

"I thought it was my turn to cook," Daniel said heavily from behind her.

"All right," she murmured. "But I'm not very hungry. I think I'll lie down for a while."

"Okay," he said. "I'll call you when dinner's ready."

"Fine." They were treating each other like polite strangers. Worse. They seemed afraid even to look at each other.

It seemed only minutes later when Daniel knocked softly against the open bedroom door. "Dinner's ready."

She toyed with the idea of telling him she wasn't feeling well, but decided it was better to face him. Things couldn't get much worse.

The table was already set when Julie pulled out the chair and sat. Daniel joined her.

"Your mother looked better to-night."

Daniel nodded.

Five minutes passed and neither spoke. Julie looked out the window and Daniel's gaze followed. "It looks like rain."

Julie nodded. Since it seemed they had no shared interests, there was little to discuss beyond his mother and the weather.

Another awkward silence filled the kitchen until Julie stood and started to load the dishwasher.

That took all of ten minutes. The hum of the dishwasher followed her into the hallway. Daniel had disappeared to his den and Julie doubted that she'd be seeing him again that evening.

Deciding to read, she returned to her room. As she turned, a glimmer of satin caught her attention. Setting the book down, she discovered that the lovely, alluring gown she'd shoved at Daniel was hanging in her closet. She touched the silky smoothness as tears jammed her throat. She'd so wanted things to be different.

"Julie." Daniel spoke from outside her room. "Are you all right?"

Angrily she turned on him. "I'm wonderful. Just leave me alone." And she closed the door.

For a stunned moment nothing happened. Then her door was knocked

open with such force that it was a wonder it wasn't ripped from the wall.

Julie gasped as Daniel marched in and hauled her into his arms.

"Put me down," she cried, kicking, but her efforts only made him tighten his grip.

"You're my wife, Julie Van Deen. And I'm tired of playing a game in which I am the loser." With that he carried her to his bedroom, slamming the door closed with his foot.

Furiously Julie wiped the tears from her face. "You didn't even tell that Kali you were married," she shouted.

"I couldn't," he shouted back. "She was in England on a business trip. Anyway, we're married. What the hell has she got to do with us now?"

"Nothing," she whispered, laughing softly. "Nothing at all."

"What's so amusing now?" he barked, and sank onto the side of his bed, his hold on her loosening.

"You wouldn't understand," she murmured. "Never mind." Gently she covered his mouth with hers.

"Julie," he groaned, his hands folding her in his embrace.

"Are you really tired of playing games?" she asked, spreading a series of sweet kisses over his face. Her eager lips sought his temple and nose, slowly progressing downward toward his mouth, teasing him with short, playful kisses along the way.

"Yes," he moaned, directing her lips to his. "Oh, Lord, yes."

A pervading warmth flowed through her. "Oh, Daniel, what took you so long?"

Slowly his hands slid across her breasts as he began unfastening the tiny buttons of her blouse. All the while his mouth moved over hers in eager passion. Frustrated, he abandoned the ef-

fort and broke the kiss long enough to try to pull the blouse over her head.

Breathless and smiling softly, Julie stopped him. "You've waited a whole month for me. Another thirty seconds shouldn't matter."

As she freed her blouse, Daniel cupped the soft mounds of her breasts and buried his face in the fragile hollow of her throat. "I couldn't live another month like the last one," he told her. "I couldn't sleep knowing you were just down the hall. Every time I closed my eyes all I could see was you. The only thing that helped was working until I was ready to drop."

"Oh, love, and I wanted you so much." Sliding her hands up and down his muscled shoulders, she felt the coiled tension ease out of him.

Hungrily he devoured her mouth. "You're my wife, Julie, the way you were always meant to be."

"I know, love, I know." Her heart singing, Julie gave herself to the only man she had ever loved.

"WAKE UP, sleepyhead," Daniel whispered. "It's morning."

"Already?" Julie groaned, resting her head in the crook of his arm. Her eyes refused to open.

"Are you happy?" Daniel asked, kissing the crown of her head.

"Oh, yes."

"Me, too." In long soothing movements, he stroked her bare arm. "I never stopped loving you, Julie. For a time I convinced myself I hated you. But the day I saw you in the elevator, I knew I'd been fooling myself. One look and I realized I'd never love another woman the way I love you."

Raising her head, Julie rolled onto her stomach and kissed him with infinite sweetness.

The hunger of his response surprised her. Quickly he altered their positions so that Julie was on her back looking up at him. His eyes burned into hers.

"Daniel," she protested, "we'll be late for work."

"Yes, we will," he agreed. "Very late."

AN HOUR LATER, while Julie dressed, Daniel fried their eggs, humming as he worked.

"My, you're in a good mood this morning," she teased, sliding her arms around his middle.

Daniel chuckled. "And with good reason." He pulled her into his arms, kissing her. "I love you."

Her eyes drank in the tenderness in his expression as she slowly nodded. "I know."

"I think it's time we took that diamond ring and put it on your finger, where it belongs," he told her gently. He slid the solitaire onto her finger with a solemnness that told her how seriously he took his vows. "I wanted you the minute the minister pronounced us man and wife," he admitted.

"And I thought—"

"I know what you thought," he said, taking her back into his embrace. "It was exactly what I wanted you to believe. My ego had suffered enough for one day. I couldn't tolerate it if you knew how badly I wanted to make love to you then." His chin brushed the top of her head.

THE WORKDAYS flew by and after a wonderful weekend together, Julie and Daniel spent a quiet Sunday with his mother at the hospital. Clara's heart surgery was scheduled for the next

Tuesday and both Julie and Daniel wanted to be with her as much as possible.

On the day, Daniel paced the waiting room as Julie sat attempting to read. Repeatedly, her concentration wandered and she glanced at her wristwatch.

"What time is it?" Daniel inquired.

What he really wanted to know, Julie realized, was how much longer it would be. The doctor had assured them the procedure would take at least five hours.

"Anytime now," Julie answered softly. They'd been in the waiting room most of the day. A nurse came at noon and suggested they have lunch. But neither was hungry.

Daniel took the seat beside her and reached for her hand. "Have I told you how much I love you?" His eyes filled with tenderness.

Before Julie could answer, the doctor, clad in a green surgical gown, walked into the room. He looked as exhausted as she felt. Automatically, both Julie and Daniel stood.

"Your mother did amazingly well," the doctor began. "Her chances appear to be excellent."

Julie smiled brightly at her husband, feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted from her back.

"Can we see her?" Daniel inquired.

"Yes, but only for a few minutes. You both can go in. She'll be in intensive care for a few days, then if everything goes well, on the surgical floor."

"How long will it be before she can come home?"

The doctor shook his head. "Hard to say. As soon as two weeks, or as long as a month."

"Thank you, Doctor." Julie smiled.

"Thank you very much."

With their hands linked, Julie and Daniel were led into the intensive care area.

Clara Van Deen's eyes fluttered open and she attempted to speak, but the words were slurred. She tried to lift one hand, but it was taped to a board to hold the IV in place.

Lovingly Daniel laid his hand over his mother's.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the nurse requested softly a couple of minutes later. "You're welcome to come back tomorrow, but for now Mrs. Van Deen needs to rest."

Julie thanked the nurse and watched an expression of tenderness move across her husband's face.

"We'll be back, Mother," he whispered softly.

The air outside the hospital felt fresh and clean. Julie paused to inhale several deep breaths. She was exhausted. With her head resting against the back of the seat, she closed her eyes as Daniel drove the short distance home.

"Julie. Wake up. We're home."

"My goodness, I don't know why I should be so tired."

"We didn't get much sleep last night," he reminded her with a roguish grin. "And the way I feel right now we may not tonight, either."

Daniel led her directly into the bedroom. "I want you to take a nice long nap and when you're rested Mother has ordered us to have a night on the town. We had a long talk yesterday, and she suggested that after we spent today at the hospital we should go out."

"Aren't you going to rest?" Julie wanted to know.

"Honey, if I crawl into that bed with you it won't be to sleep." He brushed

the hair from her temple. "Actually I've got some papers to go over. That should take an hour or two. Just enough time for you to catch up on some sleep."

The next thing she knew, Daniel was beside her, holding her close.

"Is it time to get ready for dinner?" she muttered.

"I think breakfast is more in order."

"Breakfast?" Her lashes flew up. "I couldn't have slept through the night. Could I?"

"I paraded a marching band through here late yesterday afternoon and you wouldn't budge."

Wiping the sleep from her face, Julie sat up. "I can't believe I was dead to the world for fifteen hours or more."

"I imagine you're starved."

Strangely, she wasn't at first, but once she ate breakfast, she realized how famished she actually had been.

"I'm sorry I ruined your night."

Daniel looked up from his plate and smiled tenderly. He reached out and traced the delicate line of her jaw. "You didn't ruin anything," he whispered. "Do you know how beautiful you are in your sleep? I could have watched you for hours. In fact, I did."

Somewhat embarrassed, Julie shook her head. A finger under her chin raised it to meet his eyes.

"I lay awake last night, my heart full of love, and I realized I'm the luckiest man in the world."

"Yesterday was a day to think that. Your mother survived the surgery, and we've been given a second chance to build a solid marriage."

"Yes, we have," Daniel whispered, his mouth seeking hers.

A WEEK AFTER the open-heart surgery, Clara Van Deen was sitting up in bed looking healthier than Julie could remember since returning to Wichita.

"I can't tell you how grateful I'll be to go home," she said. "Everyone's been wonderful here, but I do so miss my garden."

"And your garden misses you," Julie said with a wink to her husband.

"That's right, Mother." Daniel shook his head. "Weeds all the way up to my knees."

Clara grimaced. "I can't bear to think of what months of neglect have done to my precious yard."

Unable to continue the game any longer, Julie patted her mother-in-law's hand reassuringly. "Your garden looks lovely. Now don't you fret."

"Thanks to Julie," Daniel inserted. "She spent a good portion of the weekend weeding."

"I should have been thinking of ways to torture a husband with a loose tongue," Julie admonished. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

"My dear, Julie. You didn't really?"

"She has the blisters to prove it," Daniel inserted.

"Daniel! I didn't know your mouth was so big."

He gently squeezed her shoulder. "All the better to kiss you with, my dear."

Julie tried to hide a smile. "It's times like these that I wonder what kind of family I married into."

"One that loves you," Clara replied. "Say, Julie, isn't it today you were meeting with—"

"No," she interrupted, warning her mother-in-law to say nothing more.

Jim Patterson, a colleague of Daniel's, had let Julie know that Daniel's country club had voted him Man of the Year. She had shared the good news with Clara, who had clearly forgotten that the award was supposed to be a surprise.

Daniel made a show of glancing at his watch. "What's this about Julie meeting someone?"

"Nothing," Julie returned hastily.

"It's a surprise, son. Forgive an old woman, Julie."

"There's nothing to forgive."

"Will you two kindly let me know what's going on?"

"My lips are sealed," Julie taunted.

"Mine, too," Clara chimed in. "It's sometime this week, isn't it?"

Julie knew Clara was referring to her meeting with Jim. "Yes, over lunch. I'll let you know how everything goes." Jim wanted some details about Daniel for the skit they would perform on the award night.

Daniel's expression altered from amused to concerned on the way to the hospital parking lot. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Nope."

"At least let me know whom you're meeting with."

"Never." He looked so handsome that she couldn't resist stealing a kiss.

"What was that for?"

"Because I love you."

A brief look passed over his features. One so fleeting that Julie was almost sure she'd imagined it. But she hadn't. Daniel doubted her.

On the ride home, Julie was introspective. They'd traveled this way so many times over the past six weeks that sights along the way blended into one another.

"Daniel?" Julie sat upright.

"Hmm?"

"Take a right here," she directed. "There's a house on the corner that's for sale." They must have passed the place a thousand times. Julie had noted the Realtor's sign but now something about the house reached out to her.

Daniel eased to a stop at the tree-lined curb in front of a two-story Colonial home. The paint was peeling from the white exterior and several of the green shutters were hanging by a single hinge. "Julie," he groaned, "it doesn't even look like anyone lives there."

Julie glanced around at the neighboring homes. They were family oriented and well maintained. "All this place needs is a bit of tender, loving care."

"It's the neighborhood eyesore," Daniel said.

"I'd like to see the inside."

That same evening they met the Realtor. "I'm afraid this place has been vacant for several months," he told them.

"What did I tell you?" Daniel whispered. "This isn't for us—"

Julie climbed out of the car. "But I like it. I like it very much."

"Julie," Daniel moaned as he joined her.

The entryway was small and led to an open stairway and a long mahogany banister that rounded at the top. To her right was a huge family living room and to her left a smaller room obviously meant as a library or a den. Dust covered everything and a musty smell permeated the house. The hardwood floors were badly in need of buffing.

"You'd probably want to have these old floors carpeted," the agent suggested.

Maybe Oriental rugs, Julie thought, but it would be a shame to cover those solid wood floors.

The formal dining room had built-in china cabinets and a window seat. The kitchen was huge with a large eating area. The main level had two bedrooms and the upstairs had three more. The full basement was ideal for storage.

Desperately Julie hoped that Daniel could see the potential of the house. "It's perfect. Right down to the fenced backyard, patio and tree house."

"Perhaps you'd care to make a few comparisons with some other homes," the Realtor interjected.

Determined, Julie shook her head. "I wouldn't." Her eyes met Daniel's. She understood his doubts. This house would require weeks of expensive repairs, but the asking price was reasonable.

"In all fairness I feel you should be aware of several things."

James Derek's voice seemed to fade into the background as Julie sauntered from one room to the next.

"Julie." Daniel found her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I think we should go home and think this over before we make our final decision."

"What's there to decide? If we don't put down earnest money now, someone else will."

"That's highly unlikely, Mrs. Van Deen," the Realtor interrupted. "This place has been on the market for six months."

On the drive back to the Realtor's office it was all Julie could do to keep quiet. Then, before they climbed into

their own car, Daniel and James Derek scheduled time to go and look at other houses.

Julie closed her car door and stared straight ahead.

"Why'd you set up another appointment?" she demanded.

"To look at houses—"

"But I've found the one I want," she declared. "Daniel, I love that house. Best of all it's only a few blocks from your mother's. It's got a den for you and..."

"The repair cost alone would be more than the value of the house. The roof's got to be replaced. There's dry rot in the basement."

"I don't care," Julie stated.

"I'm not going to fight with you about it. If we're going to buy a house then it's one we both agree on."

Julie had no argument. That house was everything she wanted. Hot tears blurred her vision. Something was definitely the matter with her lately. She couldn't believe she would cry over something as silly as a house.

THE DAY Clara Van Deen came home from the hospital was the happiest Julie could remember.

Although weak, the smile on her mother-in-law's face was reward enough for Julie's long hours in her much-loved garden.

Mrs. Batten arranged huge floral bouquets around the living room and cooked a meal of roast beef, potatoes and fresh strawberry shortcake.

Sitting with Clara on the patio, in the late-afternoon sun, Julie lifted her face to its golden rays.

"Is everything all right with you, dear?"

"Of course. What could possibly be wrong?"

Clara sipped tea from her delicate china cup. "I'm not sure, but you haven't been yourself the last couple of weeks. Has this house business got you down?"

"Not really." Julie straightened. The question struck a raw nerve. "Daniel and I have agreed to wait. There's no rush."

"But there was one house you liked?"

Julie knew the smile of reassurance she gave her mother-in-law spoke more of disappointment than any confidence. "We agreed to disagree."

Clara didn't answer; her look was thoughtful. Daniel's look was almost identical when he unlocked the front door of the condo an hour later.

"Is something bothering you?" Julie asked him.

Daniel smiled wryly. "I thought we agreed not to take our disagreements to my mother?"

Julie blanched. Clara had spoken to Daniel about the house. "We did," she admitted.

"Mother had a talk with me before we left."

"I know what it sounds like," Julie cut in, "but I didn't do anything more than mention it."

A brooding silence followed and Julie watched as her husband's mouth thinned with impatience.

"If anything," she said, "I think I should have a talk with your mother. She'll have to learn that although we love her dearly, she can't become involved in our lives to the point that she takes sides. Okay?"

"Definitely."

Julie walked across the room, her arms cradling her middle in an instinctively protective action.

Daniel cleared his throat and came to stand behind her. "I can see that this house issue could grow into a major problem."

Julie shook her head. "I won't let it. All I want is to be your wife. It doesn't matter where we live."

He gathered her close. "I've been giving the house you wanted considerable thought," he whispered.

"And?" It was difficult to maintain her poise.

"I think we should be able to come up with a compromise." He drew back, his hands linked at the small of her back as he smiled at her. "I'll buy it if you agree to quit your job."

"Quit my job?" Julie repeated. "You must be joking."

"That house is going to need extensive remodeling. Someone should be there to supervise the work."

Her wide, troubled eyes searched his face. "It isn't remodeling the house needs, but repairs, most of which will have to be done before we move in." Breaking from him, Julie crossed the room. "I've seen it in you several times, but didn't bring it up—"

"You're speaking in riddles," Daniel countered.

"The house isn't the real reason—"

"I want you to be my wife."

"And I'm not now?" she responded. "I enjoy my job." Her hand made a sweeping gesture. "I've seen it in your eyes, Daniel. You think I'm going to walk out on you again. It's almost as if you're waiting for it to happen."

"You're being ridiculous."

"Am I?" she asked softly.

"I saw you with Jim Patterson last week," Daniel announced harshly.

"And you immediately jumped to conclusions."

"No." He turned around and Julie noted the heavy lines of strain around his eyes. She'd known something was wrong for days.

"Will you tell me why you and Jim found it necessary to have lunch together?"

"I can't," she whispered. "But I'm asking you to trust me. Surely you don't believe Jim and I are involved in any way?"

"I've tried. A hundred times I've told myself that you must love me. You wouldn't have come back or married me if you didn't."

"I do love you," she cried. "What makes you think I would even look at another man?"

Daniel lowered his gaze and ran a hand over his weary eyes. "Sometimes I hate myself."

"You don't trust me."

His returning look confirmed her worst suspicions. A sob rose to her throat, but she forced it down. "I love you so much I could never think about another man—or leave you. How can I convince you of that?"

Daniel couldn't meet her eyes. "I don't know." He paced the carpet. "When I first saw you with Jim, I felt sick inside, then explosive. Even though I'd heard you joke with my mother about this meeting, I couldn't believe I'd see my wife and a good friend together. I expected to wake up and find you gone."

"You actually believe that I'd run away with Jim Patterson?"

"Why not? You ran away from me before."

Julie closed her eyes. "I haven't even thought about anyone else since I moved to Wichita."

"But you had lunch with my friend. And you won't tell me why you met him." He scowled.

"No. I'm asking you to trust me."

His dark eyes narrowed. "I'm trying. Lord knows I want to, but I don't know if I can," he whispered.

"JULIE, you don't look as if you slept at all last night," Sherry told Julie the following morning.

"I didn't."

"Why not?"

Julie had felt the weight of the world pressing down on her when they'd gone to bed after their discussion. Daniel stayed on his side of the mattress, but he could have been on the other side of the world for all the warmth and comfort they shared.

"What would you think if I told you that Daniel wants me to quit my job?" she finally asked.

"Does he?" Sherry's eyes rounded with concern.

"Let's make this a hypothetical question."

Julie wondered if, without knowing the background of her relationship with Daniel, Sherry would read the same meaning into his behavior.

"Well," Sherry said, "my guess is that he's insecure about something. But it's obvious to anyone how much you love him."

"I only wish Daniel recognized that."

"You're not going to quit working, are you?" Sherry asked. "I'd miss your friendship."

"No, I'm not going to do it. But how's everything between you and Andy?"

"I get depressed so easily." Sherry lowered her gaze. "Who would have

thought wooing my husband back could be so difficult?"

Julie smiled secretly to herself. She knew exactly what Sherry meant.

The phone buzzed and Sherry looked up. Suddenly pale, she motioned for Julie to answer it as she rushed into the bathroom. Not for the first time lately, Julie suspected her friend was pregnant.

Julie was off the phone when she returned. "Are you going to tell me or are you going to make me ask?"

"How'd you know?" Sherry protested.

"Sherry, honestly. I can't believe you sometimes. Does Andy know?"

Bright tears sparkled from her eyelashes. "No. If we do get back together, I want it to be because he loves and wants me. Not because of the baby."

"The divorce proceedings were halted, weren't they?"

Sherry nodded. "But only because Andy and I felt we needed time to think things out. We're not living together."

"You won't be able to hide it from him much longer."

Sherry shrugged. "I know. That's why I've given him three weeks to decide what he wants."

"How does Andy feel about an ultimatum?"

Sherry giggled. "Andy doesn't know."

"Oh, Sherry," Julie groaned.

A tear slid down her friend's cheek. "I realize this sounds crazy, but I've thought everything out. If Andy found out about the baby and we reconciled, I'd never be sure. This way I'll have the confidence I need that he really loves me and wants to make this marriage work."

The phone rang and the two were quickly involved in business again.

Not until that night when Julie took pains to cook Daniel's favorite dinner did he notice something was different.

"Did I miss something?" he asked teasingly.

"Miss something?"

"It's not my birthday, is it? I've got it! You overdrew the checking account. Right?"

"Just because I cook stroganoff does it mean I'm up to something?" Julie inquired.

"In my short experience as a husband, my immediate reaction is... yes!"

"Well, you're wrong. I've bought a cookbook. I can't have my husband fainting away from lack of nourishment."

"Would you like me to demonstrate how weak I am?" he asked, slipping his hands over her breasts and pulling her against him.

"Daniel, not now."

"Why not?" he growled against her neck.

"I thought you were hungry?"

"I am. Come to bed and I'll show you how hungry."

Julie switched off the stove and turned into her husband's arms, meeting the urgency of his kiss with a willingness that surprised even Julie. She did love this man. Someday he'd realize how much.

Dusk had settled over the city before they stirred an hour later. Daniel's hand caressed her bare shoulder. "I'll be happy when you're pregnant," he whispered.

Involuntarily Julie stiffened. "Why?"

"I thought you wanted a family?"

"I do." But first she wanted them secure in their marriage.

"Then why the questions?"

"I want to know why you want a baby." Her greatest fear was that he would see a child as the means of binding her to him.

"For all the reasons a man usually wants to be a father. As I recall, we agreed that when you were pregnant, you'd quit your job."

Reaching for her robe at the foot of the bed, Julie buried her arms deep within the blue silk. She didn't know how any couple could make such beautiful love together and then argue. "I think you should know I've made an appointment with the doctor."

The silence grew and grew.

"So you think you might be pregnant?"

"No, I want to make sure that doesn't happen."

AS THE DAYS passed Julie had never been more miserable. Daniel treated her with icy politeness, and if she'd thought the first days of their marriage were a test of her love it was nothing compared to this.

Daniel threw himself into his work, and Julie did her best to give the outward appearance that everything was fine. She spent more and more of her evenings with her mother-in-law, as they worked getting Clara's beloved yard into shape.

"I was surprised to see that old engagement picture of you and Daniel on the television," Clara remarked casually. She had recently visited them for the first time since their marriage.

"We both look young, don't we?" Julie asked.

"It's difficult to remember you like that."

Julie had the impression her mother-in-law wasn't referring to looks. "We've all changed."

They continued working silently.

"Something's bothering Daniel," Clara announced, studying her daughter-in-law closely.

"He's been working a lot of extra hours lately."

"Is it necessary?"

"I... I don't know." Avoiding her mother-in-law's gaze, Julie weeded another section of the flower bed.

"You look a bit peaked yourself," Clara Van Deen continued. "What's the matter with you two?"

Settling back on her heels, Julie sighed heavily. "Clara, I do love Daniel."

"And he loves you. You know, he knew where you were in California. All these years he's known and loved you. Whatever is bothering you two can't be worth all this torment. But I know how stubborn my son can be. Just be patient with him."

"I'm trying," Julie whispered, struggling not to cry.

BACK HOME an hour later, Julie soaked in a tub filled with hot water and perfumed bubble bath. She had no idea where Daniel was. Although it was Saturday, he'd left early that morning.

Julie had hoped that a bubble bath would raise her spirits. She'd been so tired lately. It was ridiculous. It seemed she went to bed every night before Daniel and had trouble dragging herself up in the morning. That wasn't like her. Nor was her unbalanced appetite. She was starving one moment and feeling as if she'd overeaten the next.

Her appointment with the doctor was next week; she'd mention it to him. Her body had been doing funny things lately.

Abruptly, Julie sat up in the tub. In a flash she knew. She was pregnant. So much had been happening that she'd completely lost track of time. Biting into her trembling bottom lip, Julie leaned back and placed a hand on her flat stomach. Daniel would be pleased, and despite her misgivings, Julie's heart swelled with joy. Just as quickly, tears flooded her eyes. Desperately she wanted this child, but she wanted the baby to come into a warm, secure marriage and not one torn by tension and mistrust. Sniffling, she wiped the moisture from her face.

Dripping water and bubbles over the bathroom floor, Julie wrapped a towel around her body. Mixed emotions flew at her from all directions until she wanted to thrash out her arms to ward them off.

Sitting on top of their bed, she reached for the phone and dialed Daniel's office where she suspected he'd be. The phone rang twice before she cut the connection. What could she possibly say?

Sniffling anew, Julie dialed again and waited several long rings. "Sherry," she said, relieved that her friend was home. "Congratulate me, we're both pregnant." With that she burst into sobs.

"HERE," Sherry said, handing Julie another tissue. "You're going to need this."

A dry-eyed Julie glanced at the tissue, then back to her friend. "I'm through crying. It was a shock, that's all." Within fifteen minutes of receiv-

ing the call, Sherry had arrived, flushed and excited.

"Discovering I was pregnant was a shock for me, too, if you recall. At first I was ecstatic, then I had doubts. Three days later I leveled out at 'great.'"

Julie's smile was wan. "A baby is exactly what Daniel wants."

"But for all the wrong reasons," Sherry claimed heatedly. "If Andy knew about me, I suspect he'd be thrilled, but again for all the wrong reasons."

Julie nodded, feeling slightly ill. She hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"What did Daniel say?" Sherry asked.

"He doesn't know yet."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. He has to be told, but I don't know when. He's...hardly around anymore."

"So he's pulling that trick again," Sherry huffed.

"He's working himself to death."

"Or he could be out having the time of his life as Andy did."

Julie doubted that. "I don't think so."

"Ha! That's what I thought about Andy. But I won't let you sit here and sulk. Come on, I'm taking you out."

"Sherry, honestly, the last thing in the world I want is to be seen in public. I look a mess."

"So, it'll take a bit of inventive application with your makeup. My friend, I'm going to let you in on one of life's important secrets."

"Oh?" Julie was dubious.

"When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping."

"Sherry," Julie groaned. "I don't feel up to—"

"Trust me, you'll feel a hundred percent better. Afterward I'll treat you to dinner."

"But Daniel..."

"Did he bother to tell you he wouldn't be home for dinner the last three nights?"

"No." She lowered her gaze to disguise the pain.

"Then it's time you quit moping around and do something positive for yourself."

"All right," Julie agreed, "I'll go."

It took an hour to get ready, but Sherry was right—she felt better for it. Before they left, Julie penned Daniel a short note, telling him whom she was with. He might not want to know, but Julie felt better for having done it.

Sherry seemed intent on having a good time. First they visited the mall stores, scouting out baby items and trying on maternity dresses.

Next they took in a movie, and had an Italian dinner afterward. On the way home, Sherry insisted that they stop off at her house so Julie could see the baby blanket she was knitting.

"I think I'd better call Daniel," Julie said, sipping her cup of tea. Already it was after eleven and although she had left the note, he might be worried. She *hoped* he'd be worried.

"Don't," Sherry chastised. "He hasn't phoned you lately, has he?"

"No," Julie admitted. She had barely seen him.

"I think I'll put on some soothing music."

"Good idea," Julie chimed in.

THE NEXT thing Julie knew, she was lying on the sofa, wrapped in a thick comforter. Struggling to sit upright, she glanced at her watch.

"I was wondering what time you'd wake up," Sherry called. "How do you want your eggs?"

"It's morning?" Julie was incredulous.

"Right, and almost ten. You were tired, my friend."

"Oh, good grief." She stood up. "I'd better call Daniel."

"Go ahead. The phone's on the counter."

While Julie dialed, Sherry handed her a small glass of orange juice and two soda crackers. Julie smiled. Her stomach had been queasy for several mornings.

Ten rings later, she hesitantly replaced the receiver.

"No answer?" asked Sherry.

"No. Maybe he was in the shower."

"Maybe. Try again in five minutes."

"At least he knows whom I'm with. If he was worried he would have called."

Sherry turned back to the stove. "He didn't know."

"I left a note."

"I stuck it in my pocket before we left your place. Heavens, I didn't know you were going to fall asleep on me and spend the night. I thought if Daniel worried a little it would be good for him."

"Oh, Sherry."

"It was a rotten thing to do. Are you mad?"

Julie shook her head, feeling defeated. Sherry had no idea that she had walked out on Daniel once and he was sure to believe she'd done it again.

But fifteen minutes later, Julie used her key to open her front door. The room was dark, and she walked over to open the drapes.

"Julie?"

Abruptly, she swiveled around to find Daniel sitting in a chair, his dark eyes wide and disbelieving.

"Hello, Daniel." He looked so utterly dejected that she fought back the tears.

Quickly the proud mask he wore slid into place and he stood. "I suppose you came back for your things."

"No." Somehow she managed to let the lone word escape. His clothes were badly wrinkled and his hair was rumpled.

Apparently he didn't hear her. "Well, go ahead and get them. Don't let me stop you."

"You want me to leave?" she asked.

"I won't stop you."

She dropped her gaze as the pain washed over her. "I see." Julie took a step toward the hallway.

Daniel jerked his head up as she moved. "Julie."

Their eyes met and held. Neither seemed willing to break the contact. The tears filled her eyes and she wiped them aside with the back of her hand.

"I don't blame you for walking out on me," he spoke at last. "I drove you to it." He jerked his hand through his hair. "I let you out of my life the first time and blamed you for it. God help me, I can't do it again." He took a tentative step toward her. "Once you're gone, there won't be any more sunshine in my life—don't leave me," he pleaded. "Let me make up for all the unhappiness I've caused you."

With a cry of joy, Julie reached out to him and Daniel crushed her into his embrace. He took deep breaths as he struggled with emotion.

"It doesn't matter why you saw Jim or any other man. I was a fool to think everything would be solved by having you quit your job."

"Daniel, listen—"

"I love you, Julie, you're the most important person in my life. I can't let you go."

Cupping his ears, Julie lifted his head and spread tiny kisses over his face. "Would you kindly listen to me for one minute? I'm not leaving and never was. That was all a mix-up that we have to thank Sherry for. And as for my job, I plan to work for about another six months and then think about quitting."

"That sounds fair," he said. "Why six months?"

"Because by then the baby—"

"The baby?" Daniel repeated, stunned. His frown deepened. "Julie, are you telling me you're pregnant?"

Twenty-four hours ago, Julie would have been just as shocked had anyone mentioned her condition.

"How? When?" He looked completely flustered.

"You don't honestly need an answer to that, do you?"

"No," he agreed, his eyes shining. "All these weeks I'd hoped you would be. I wanted a child to bind you to me. Now I realize you've always been with me. Even while you lived in California, you were here in my heart."

Slipping her arms around her husband's neck, Julie smiled into the loving depths of his tender gaze. "We're already bound."

"By our love," he finished for her. When his mouth sought hers, Julie surrendered to her husband's deep hunger, secure in his love. "You needn't worry, Julie. I learned some valuable lessons about myself last night while I sat here alone. I was convinced my selfishness had driven you away a second time. Now I feel like a fool who's been given a second chance at

happiness. Believe me, this time I'm not going to blow it."

"WE'RE HOME," Julie said gently as she saw her mother-in-law rocking her three-month-old son a year later. She paused in the living room. Daniel had bought the house she'd loved, and made extensive repairs. "You know who you remind me of?" Julie asked, lifting the sleeping baby from Clara's arms.

"Probably Whistler's mother," the older woman answered. She had spent the evening with little Ted while Julie and Daniel attended a banquet at the country club.

"Was Jim surprised to be named Man of the Year?" Clara asked.

"No more than I was last year," Daniel chuckled. "But then last year was a very good year."

"It was indeed," Clara murmured. "I was given a new lease on life."

"So was I." Daniel slipped an arm around his wife's trim waist and lovingly kissed his son's brow.

Julie smiled down on her baby. "Was he good?"

"Not a peep. I must admit to being a bit frightened by him yet. He's so small. Theodore August Van Deen seems such a big name for such a tiny baby."

"He'll grow," Daniel said confidently. "And be joined by several more if his mother agrees."

"Oh, I'm in full agreement."

The baby let out a small cry.

"It isn't his feeding time, is it?"

Clara looked up.

"Not yet," Julie assured her.

"Don't worry, Grandma, babies sometimes cry for no reason."

"Teddy-boy, Grandma's joy." Clara took the baby from Julie and patted his tiny back.

With infinite tenderness Daniel turned Julie into his arms, burying his face in the warm hollow of her throat. "I love you, Julie Van Deen." He looked deeply into her soft blue eyes.

"And I you, my husband."

"The hurts and doubts are gone forever. I've buried my yesterdays."

"And look with happy excitement toward our tomorrows," she whispered softly and smiled.






ELDA MINGER

Seize the Fire



Delia Wilde and Morgan Buckmaster, now a movie superstar, were lovers in London when they were students there, but circumstances forced them apart. When Delia contacts Morgan to star in her new film, it seems that history may be about to repeat itself.



What am I doing here?

Morgan had asked himself the question countless times during the last two hours.

It's too good a part to pass up.

No, he corrected. *You wanted to see her again.*

Everything always came back to Delia. As he sipped his drink and eyed the crowded room, he studied her. Reality was so much better than all the nights he'd dreamed of her.

THE SURROUNDING peace and serenity couldn't have been more at odds with the way Delia felt.

She stood on the balcony of her father's Malibu beach house watching the gentle ebb and flow of the Pacific under a full moon.

Whatever had possessed her to think of Morgan Buckmaster for the part?

She tightened her fingers on the railing as she heard the glass door behind her slide open.

"I thought I'd find you out here."

Delia kept her back to him. Morgan Buckmaster was an expert at searching people's faces to discover the emotions that played across their features. The gift of an actor.

"You've become a beautiful woman, Delia."

"Thank you." She swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "I'm going to get something to drink. Would you like anything?" She was halfway across the large balcony when he spoke.

"You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

There was a strange quality to his voice.

Delia turned mid-step, trying to control escalating emotions. "No," she stated flatly.

"Good." Morgan patted the rail. "Come back for a minute. Then, I promise you, we'll go inside."

Delia tensed as she felt his hand close over hers. Her stomach knotted in anticipation of promised pleasures. Morgan slowly raised her hand to his lips. They felt warm against the inside of her wrist. She glanced up. Once his gaze caught hers, she couldn't look away. The sensuous dark eyes she'd seen so many times in her dreams were studying her. Delia wanted to break free, but she couldn't.

"You have the softest skin," he murmured. "Eyes as blue as periwinkles," he breathed. "And lips as red—" his mouth was a heartbeat away from hers "—as a rose."

His lips touched hers gently, sensually. They were warm and firm. Experienced. Delia's legs started to shake as Morgan moved his hands over her bare back, and a heated weakness suffused her body. Delia longed to give in to pure sensation, letting Morgan take her higher and higher.

His hands touched her silk-covered hips and pulled her against him tightly, making her aware of his hard masculine strength, the clean scent of his cologne, the warmth of his body.

His lips teased hers apart, deepening the kiss, making her aware of his

desire. She felt his tongue move inside her mouth, urging her response, making her want him. But she couldn't. Not this time. Not again.

Delia tried to wrench herself away from his grasp, but his fingers laced through her hair, coerced her to turn her face to his and bend her head back so his lips could kiss her neck and move lower still, to the slight shadow between her breasts.

Somewhere, as if in a very distant dream, she heard a deep voice boom out, "Come on. We're ready to cut the cake!"

Morgan finally released her. He was breathing deeply, his dark eyes burning as if lit by an inner fire, watching her.

She turned away from him, furious that he still affected her as no other man could. She ran to the sliding door, shutting it sharply behind her.

Her father's guests were by the large oak buffet table where a tiered cake glittered with sparklers. Though the dinner party had been small, the living room seemed quite crowded. All the guests were gathered around James Wilde, standing over his seventieth birthday cake.

"There you are!" He was clearly glad to see his daughter.

Delia smiled, her expression softening as she looked up at her father. James Wilde was a big bear of a man with a heart as light as a child's. When Delia had been small, she had worshipped him. Now, many years later, she still loved him with all the intensity she'd felt as a little girl.

Now she stood at his side. "Do you want me to help you?" she asked softly.

He shook his head, frowning. "Mary's getting out the champagne. Why don't you help her?"

Though Delia had resented Mary as a child, as a woman of twenty-eight she could understand that her stepmother suited her father. Their love was rare and wonderful to watch.

Delia walked into the kitchen.

"Has James talked to Morgan about the film?" Mary asked.

Delia shook her head.

Mary smiled. "James likes him. I can tell. I—"

"Mary, we're waiting!" There was a hint of humor in her husband's voice.

"I'm coming," she called, then said to Delia, "You'll have to talk to Morgan soon."

"I know. I will." As soon as Mary left, Delia leaned back against the kitchen counter.

Was it only three months ago that she'd thought everything in her world secure? Now the only thing that mattered was her father. And getting the film done.

She picked up two more bottles of champagne and walked into the crowded living room.

James had made it the favorite area of the beach house. It was expensively informal, with plush sand-colored carpeting and a west wall composed entirely of windows. The view of the ever-changing Pacific was magnificent. On the mantel rested three Oscars, silent testimony to James's acting career. Warm cream walls were almost entirely covered with photos. Delia as a child, James and Mary on the ranch, James with actors and directors from all over the world. An entire life was captured on those walls.

The cake had been cut. James was seated on a large leather sofa with Mary, opening presents. His delighted laughter filled the room and tore at Delia's heart. She stared at her father, her vision blurring.

"Do you need any help?"

Her eyes slowly focused on Morgan's dark face. He used to know her emotions so well. How much had he seen revealed in her face?

"Here." She thrust the two bottles she was holding toward him. "Let's get the champagne out before it gets warm."

A short while later Delia found herself on the other end of the sofa with Morgan. "What is it you do, Delia, besides lie out on that balcony and sunbathe?" The remark could have been cruel, but his tone wasn't.

Delia yearned to share her emotions with him—her excitement and fear over her part in the film, her feelings about her father. But her cautious side remembered emotional pain at his hands. *I live from day to day and try to believe life will get better.*

"I'm a director," she said.

His dark eyes widened a fraction. "Everyone in Hollywood wants to direct. What is it you really do?"

His refusal to take her seriously made her see red. Without a word, she stood up and walked away.

She spent the rest of the evening by her father's side, surrounded by his old friends. But later on he approached her again.

"Did I offend you?" he asked.

"No," she answered coldly.

"How many films have you directed?" He seemed interested.

"Three."

"Big budget, were they?"

"Listen, you—"

But she was interrupted as Bob Rosenthal swept her into a hug. "Lovely. The image of your mother," he said.

Delia was uncomfortably aware of Morgan watching the entire exchange, as Bob gave her a quick kiss on the forehead, then turned his attention to Morgan.

"Good evening, Mr. Buckmaster. Have you decided whether or not you're signing on?" The producer's tone was friendly, yet firm.

Morgan's dark glance was impassive. "I think so. I've always wanted to work with James Wilde, and the script is brilliant."

Bob was pleased. "Then you'll be down at my office on Monday?"

Morgan nodded. "Who's directing?"

Bob seemed surprised. "Didn't James tell you? Delia is directing."

With confirmation of his suspicions, the skin around Morgan's mouth whitened, and a muscle tightened in his jaw.

Yet he had too much business sense to lose his temper in front of Bob. He shook the man's outstretched hand. "I'll see you on Monday. And thank you."

He caught her eye. "Delia, could I talk to you for a moment?"

She was about to refuse when his fingers closed over her wrist. She nodded and allowed him to pull her gently away from Bob.

Once they were out on the balcony, Morgan got straight to the point.

"Why the hell are you directing this picture?"

"It's a major step in my career," she replied flippantly. "Surely you can understand that?"

"Isn't it really just a matter of letting Daddy buy you a film?" His tone was meant to wound.

Delia couldn't see for a moment, could hardly breathe, her anger at Morgan was so intense.

She clenched her hands into fists. And yet, she could see his point. The three films she'd directed so far had been low budget—and not very well distributed. She doubted Morgan would have seen them in England. And clearly she wouldn't have been given this opportunity if she wasn't James Wilde's daughter.

But wasn't that why she was doing this film?

"I guess it's just a matter of take it or leave it, isn't it?" Though she hated to do this to James, she wanted Morgan's final decision before the night was over.

"I'll see you tomorrow at noon," he said abruptly. "At my house for lunch. We'll discuss this... fiasco when you get there." And without a backward glance he slammed the glass door shut behind him.

DELIA WAS almost asleep on the chaise longue when Mary stepped out on the balcony.

"James is fine," she said. "I've got him settled for the evening." She sat down. "Thank you, Delia."

"For what?" She sat up.

"For the party. For finding the script, and all your endless talks with Bob. For making sure the entire film will come together." She paused. "For facing Morgan again."

Delia sighed. "I was surprised he accepted your invitation." She avoided Mary's eyes. "I'm going to have nothing but trouble with him." Delia suddenly realized one of the reasons she

loved Mary so much was because you could tell her anything and she would never judge you.

"I thought as much," the older woman replied. "He was watching you throughout the party."

Delia nodded. "Oh, he's quite hot on getting me back in bed again. He just doesn't think I can direct worth a damn."

"He'd be a fool to refuse the part. It's better than anything he's done in several years. Working with an actor like James will give him a chance to stretch himself."

Delia nodded. She just wasn't sure whether she wanted Morgan in the film for her father or for herself.

Mary stood, then leaned over to give Delia a quick kiss. "Get to bed soon, all right?"

"I will." There was something in her stepmother's expression that made Delia want to comfort her. She stood up quickly, put her arms around Mary and hugged her tightly.

As Mary slid the glass door open, Delia walked over to the rail.

Three months ago Dr. Taylor had found the tumors. James had gone into surgery immediately. They had thought the worst was over, but the malignancy had spread. Now it was only a matter of time.

So Delia had moved out of her town house and come back to her father's home, and all the while she'd thought about what would make the rest of her father's life as full as possible. And her idea for his final film was born.

She was no stranger to the intricate world of filmmaking. It was part of the legacy James had given her, and that was why she had planned the film as carefully as if she had been executing a battle. From the first call to her god-

father, Bob Rosenthal, to finding the perfect script, to the party tonight. She had overseen it all.

DELIA believed nothing Morgan could do would unnerve her as much as their encounter on the balcony. But she was wrong.

He answered the door in his swimming trunks, his muscular body bronzed and dripping with water. "Shall we go into the living room?" he asked smoothly, taking her arm before she could say a word.

His living room turned out to be a small redwood deck with separate levels. Bright tubs of herbs and flowering plants spilled their color and pungent fragrances into the spicy salt air. The steps led straight down to white sand and roaring waves.

Delia forgot her previous unease. "How lovely." She walked to the edge of the deck.

"I like it," Morgan replied, watching her.

"You spend a lot of time out here," she said, her eyes moving over his deeply tanned body.

He nodded. "When I first moved out here, it seemed like endless summer."

"I remember the weather in London." She immediately regretted the words.

His expression changed. "This is nothing like London."

She knew he wasn't just talking about the weather.

"Do you own this house?" she asked.

"I always lease . . . with an option to buy."

How like him, Delia thought. The perpetual gypsy.

"Can I help you with lunch?"

He shook his head. "Just sit right here." He led her to a small wooden picnic table with benches, then disappeared inside.

What kind of man had Morgan become? Before she could explore this thought further, Morgan reappeared.

"Lunch is served," he announced. He set a large blue-and-white ceramic bowl on the table, then returned to the interior of the house.

Delia recognized the earthy smell of pesto. It carried her back to other times, to their small kitchen in London. She had loved making this dish for Morgan.

Her thoughts were broken as he returned with a bottle of white wine and a bowl of grated Parmesan cheese.

He sat opposite her and proceeded to dish the pasta out into their bowls. Then he uncorked the wine.

There was something unbearably intimate about eating with Morgan again, even if they did eat in silence.

Then Morgan fetched another large bowl and proceeded to dish salad onto their plates.

It was delicious. He certainly hadn't been starving without her.

She watched as Morgan cleared away the dishes, then set out a small coffeepot. Pouring a tiny amount of coffee into a bowl, he mixed sugar with it until it created a thick, light brown paste. He spooned a little into one cup, then looked at her.

"Do you still take lots of sugar?" he asked.

He remembered. She was ridiculously, childishly pleased.

"Yes. It smells wonderful." She indicated the coffeepot in front of him.

"It's my one indulgence. There's a shop on Rodeo Drive where I buy Italian coffee." He poured the dark, fra-

grant liquid into both their cups. "It's expensive, but I have to have it."

The scent of espresso filled the air as Delia lifted the cup to her lips. If she closed her eyes, she could easily imagine herself back in Italy with Morgan.

Resolutely, she kept her eyes open. They had finished their meal, and Delia remembered the original purpose of her visit. *He's testing you.* She had to be on her guard.

"Let's sit down by the steps," he said.

As she followed him, the question that had nagged at her all afternoon surfaced with sudden clarity. Could she ever trust him, or was he acting with her again? How could she be sure? Could she work with a man she had once loved so intensely?

As if reading her mind, he said, "It won't be easy. You know it's very unusual for a director your age to be in charge of a film like this."

Delia stiffened. She knew Morgan too well.

"Yes, it is. I would never have gotten it if it wasn't for my father," she admitted quietly.

"At least you're honest. Are you scared?" Morgan had a talent for getting straight to the heart of the matter.

Delia thought quickly of her father, of the unguarded moments when she had glimpsed the pain in his face, the acceptance in his eyes. That was courage.

"No. Not of the movie."

"What are you scared of?"

She studied his face—the black eyes, chiseled facial structure, the strong jaw.

"Sometimes I think—" She stopped and set her coffee cup down. "I'm afraid of you."

His expression remained impassive.

"Is there another man in your life?"

"No. Only my father."

His arm slipped around her shoulders, his bare chest warm against her side. Delia knew he was going to kiss her. And she wanted him to.

"I've never stopped wanting you." His breath tickled her ear.

She felt sudden tears burn her eyes. *Wanting isn't the same as loving.*

"Why did you leave?"

Of all the questions Morgan could have asked her, this was not one of them.

Tears filled her eyes. She bowed her head and pulled her knees up against her face. Morgan let her sit like that for a long time. He stroked her hair, the back of her neck, her narrow shoulders.

Finally, she lifted her head. "Morgan, if we work together, I don't want to start up our old relationship. I want you to be in the film, and so does James. But that's it. Do you understand?"

"No." His answer was barely a whisper as he cupped her chin, turning her head toward his.

She pulled away as his lips met hers, then felt his fingers tighten; then his other hand touched her cheek, cupped her face and made her meet his kiss. It was a deep kiss, long and warm, without reserve. Delia struggled slightly, but Morgan took the lead with all the intimate skill she remembered. Soon she felt herself respond.

His lips left hers for an instant, then moved to her ear, her temple, then the tip of her nose and back to her mouth. She was holding on to him as if by letting go she might spin off the deck with the force of emotion exploding inside her.

His lips moved down her neck, then to her shoulder. "So sweet," he whispered.

The respite gave her a chance to breathe again. To think. He kissed her shoulder. In another instant she knew he would claim her lips again.

"No." With sudden clarity she knew she couldn't continue to let this happen. She pushed at his chest. "Morgan, no." Her voice was low and firm.

He stood up and moved away from her, but his eyes never left her face.

"What is it you want, Delia?"

You. "I want you to work on this film." She swallowed nervously. "I want our relationship to be as professional as possible. On and off the set."

He sat down a few feet away from her, then leaned back on his elbows.

"Delia," he began, his voice low and intimate, "we're good together. We respect each other. And it isn't as if we're both virgins." When she didn't answer, he continued, "I don't understand you. I know you wanted to make love a few minutes ago."

She clenched her hands into fists. He knew her so well.

"I'm leaving, Morgan."

He was standing now.

"Will you be doing the picture or not?"

He approached her, and it took every inch of her willpower not to move away.

"Why do you act this way?" His dark eyes assessed her. "You're twenty-eight years old, Delia. Surely you can't be as innocent to the ways of the world as you act." His tone was slightly mocking.

I want you to love me the way I loved you. "I want to direct this film with a minimum of complications. If you want an affair—" she prayed her

voice wouldn't tremble "—then we'll wait until after filming is completed."

His dark eyes narrowed. "I see. If I run after you like a child, I get the candy stick in the end. Is that it?"

Frustrated, she walked down the deck stairs and began moving around the side of the house. Her temper had reached its boiling point. "Damn you! The script's the best you've had in ages. You'd work beautifully with my father." She took a deep breath. "What the hell do you want?"

"You."

She was almost to her car when his hand closed over her upper arm. "Delia, wait."

She stopped. She wouldn't make a scene.

"I've never felt about any woman the way I feel about you."

She looked up at his face, seeking visual confirmation that he wasn't joking. But he was serious. She barely heard his next words.

"I've never stopped wanting you, Delia." He seemed confused.

"Let me go."

"What the hell is the matter with you!"

She moved toward her car.

"You were the one who walked out on me!" His voice was angry, harsh.

She stopped, confused. He sounded like a man who had been deeply hurt. Could she believe him? "One of the Finest Actors in the Western World," *Time* had christened him. How could she be sure?

"And no one walks out on Morgan Buckmaster. Is that it?" She opened the door and slid inside. Seconds later she drove out into the stream of traffic without looking back at him.

Delia drove as far as the next curve on Pacific Coast Highway, then had to

pull over. Her hands were shaking so badly she could barely grasp the wheel.

She closed her eyes. Her body was so tense it hurt. After so many years, she was still angry with Morgan. How could she possibly work with him?

But the decision had already been made. Morgan wouldn't agree to do the film after the way she had treated him. She'd have to start considering other actors. James would be disappointed. How could she have done this to her father?

When she got home, Mary and James were out on the balcony. Delia avoided both of them and went straight to her room. Once inside, she threw herself on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

How could she ever tell James? *Maybe someone else should direct the picture.* The idea came to her swiftly, but she rejected it immediately. She rolled over and shut her eyes.

It seemed like only minutes later that Mary was shaking her gently awake. "Delia, Morgan's on the phone."

She felt dull and tired as she walked into the hall and picked up the phone.

"Hello, Delia. I called to tell you that while I still don't approve of the idea of your directing, I'll take the part." He paused. "I'm only doing this because I want to work with James Wilde."

She sat down suddenly, so lost in happiness that she had to concentrate to hear the rest of what he was saying.

"One slip and I'll insist on hiring a real director, so you'd better damn well know what you're doing. Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

"Thank you, Morgan. All clear. I understand, and I'll see you on the set."

She hung up before he could say another word.

*

THE STABLE smelled of straw and liniment as Delia walked past the row of box stalls. An early morning ride was just the thing to calm her before Morgan arrived later today.

They'd spent six weeks in Los Angeles, shooting interiors. And Morgan still hadn't come close to respecting her. He did his job, but he'd made it painfully clear that he was working with James, not with her.

She'd managed to shoot extra footage of her father, especially close-ups. So far the picture seemed to have invigorated James.

All exteriors would be shot at the ranch. Delia was thankful the May weather was mild with bright, clear sunshine. So far, everything was running exactly on schedule—and to budget.

Delia paused by one stall and peeked inside. Falstaff, her father's champion quarter horse, stood solidly inside, his chestnut coat gleaming faintly in the early morning light.

"What a good boy you are," she said. "I'm taking Cinderina for a ride today, or I'd take you. But you don't really like anyone but James on your back, do you?" She produced a lump of sugar from her pocket. Falstaff had a notorious sweet tooth. She held it out to him, her palm flat, and almost laughed as his soft lips tickled over her hand. She patted him.

Within fifteen minutes she had bridled and saddled Cinderina and was swinging up into the saddle when she heard a familiar voice.

"Cordelia Wilde, what's bothering you this early in the morning?" Tom

Donahue, stable manager, short and wiry as a bantam rooster, came sauntering out into the cool morning air.

She smiled. "I just thought I'd take a ride, that's all," she replied, imitating his Irish brogue. She loved Tom dearly.

"Don't lie to this one." He jabbed at his chest. "It's worried you are about something, and I mean to find out!"

She sat back in the saddle and laughed. Some of the tension left her chest, and she swung down and led Cinderina over to where Tom stood.

"It's James. It's the film. Morgan Buckmaster arrives today. Oh, Tom, I'm just so scared. It never stops."

"How's the old man?" Tom asked gruffly. He was the only one, other than herself, Mary and Dr. Johnson, the local physician, who knew of James's condition.

"The same. He's perked up because of the film. I hope he'll make it through all the exteriors—they're the first we shoot."

Tom nodded.

"I want this film to be good, Tom. I don't give a damn about my own career at this point. I just want it to be good for him—" As tears clogged her throat, she stopped talking. Then she went on, "I just can't believe he's going to die. He seems so cheerful some mornings."

"What does it take to direct one of these films?" Tom asked bluntly.

Delia sighed. "You have to be on top of everything. The actors' performances are brought out by whatever I can give them to work with. I pick the order—" She started to laugh. "Oh, what the hell, I'm in charge of the whole damn thing!"

Tom smiled. "You can be pretty bossy when you mean to be, miss. I don't understand what your problem is. Surely all these people have to know it's your first time for such a big show."

"Morgan," she murmured softly—not even aware she'd spoken aloud.

"Morgan, is it? You're worried about the famous Mr. Buckmaster?"

Delia felt her face grow warm. "He took the news about my directing badly," she admitted.

"Delia, girl, the man probably doesn't even know how to sit a horse. He has his fears like anyone else. Don't you understand that?"

She shook her head. Not Morgan. She thought of him as the devil himself, scared of nothing.

"Don't shake your head at me. I know people. I'll take care of this man if he troubles you."

The image of Tom up against Morgan was so amusing, Delia bit her lip to keep from smiling. Dear Tom.

THE BREAKFAST nook was a favorite spot inside the ranch house. But Delia barely took in the cheerful blue-and-white decor as her eyes settled on Morgan and the young woman next to him.

Belinda Peters was to play James's daughter. Her romance with Morgan was one of the chief conflicts in the script. Delia had to admit she was perfect for the part. Her blond hair was shot through with streaks of pure gold. Her blue eyes were set in a face composed of startling classic features. She looked like a young Grace Kelly—the perfect foil for Morgan.

They sat close together, both dressed for traveling. Delia was suddenly aware

of her own jeans and sweatshirt, and that she smelled of horse.

She bent and kissed her father. "Hello, Dad." He looked tired. "Tom and I went riding this morning." She turned to address Morgan and Belinda. "I hope you both had a good flight."

Belinda nodded, then spoke, "One of your men met us at the airport. I don't think we could have found the place otherwise." She smiled at Delia, her features perfect and glowing.

At that moment, Mary came in with a tray of waffles and a pitcher of heated syrup. A silence descended as everyone began to help themselves to food.

"I'm going to take off my boots," Delia announced, then exited gracefully.

She reached her room, surprised to find her hands trembling. *From seeing Morgan? No. From seeing him with Belinda?* Ah, now we're getting close. Even after weeks of filming in Los Angeles, she still wasn't sure how close they were.

So what's it to you? You don't care anymore. She ran a comb through her wind-tangled hair and pulled it back off her face with a band.

They were all still at the table when she returned.

Tom finished his waffles and pushed back his chair. "James, I'd like you to see the Arabian stallion I talked with you about. He's a mean one—but once I gentle him he'll be good to the mares, I can assure you."

Delia concentrated on cutting her waffle. Frank talk at the table about the horses was nothing new, but with Morgan here, it made her uneasy. She looked at her father.

His deep blue eyes were sparked with interest. "Mary, we'll be out by the barn." The two older men got up as Mary began to clear the table. Belinda offered to help. Delia realized she and Morgan would be the only two people left, so she started to get up.

"Delia, stay." The softness in his voice surprised her. "You've barely started to eat. Don't make me feel responsible for your skipping breakfast."

She couldn't let him know how he affected her. "It isn't you," she said hastily. "I want to go out to the barn and see the new stallion."

"Then you won't mind if I come along?"

He had trapped her. Her eyes met his for just an instant. *Touché*, she thought.

TOM JOINED them at the rail. He patted Delia on her shoulder. "Come on, miss. You're the one who always names them. Give this wild one a title worthy of all that fire!" He grinned. "Your father is absolutely delighted. I haven't seen him look so good since—" He stopped, aware of Morgan behind him.

Delia frowned. "Black as sin, wild as the wind—" She played with the words. Suddenly, she laughed. "Hades!" she shouted, turning to Tom. "Hades, king of the underworld!"

"Hades it is," Morgan repeated. He leaned on the fence. "You know, now that I'm finally here, I can understand why you missed it so much. As we were driven in, all I could see were mountains and sky. London must have been awfully confining."

"At times. At times it was..." She stopped herself. At times it had been the most exciting place on earth, but

only because of Morgan. "At times it was very pleasant." Such a tame word to describe what she and Morgan had shared.

He was watching her now, like a hawk eyeing a mouse. "Your step-mother prepared the guest house for Belinda and me."

Delia felt as if all the air were being squeezed out of her lungs.

"I'll be sleeping in the main bedroom," he continued, "but Belinda said she'd take the smaller bedroom off the kitchen." When she didn't reply, he said, "We're not sleeping together, despite what you may think." And with that he turned and walked away.

Delia didn't look back. She kept her eyes on the animal in the corral. The long black mane and tail fluttered in the spring breeze; the obsidian eyes flashed.

"I should have named you Morgan," she said.

"Cur!"

Delia bit her lip and tried to control her temper. Morgan was already creating problems. She motioned him over to her with an impatient flick of her hand.

His walk was smooth and assured. Any other actor might have looked anxious. Not Morgan. Was it her imagination or was he enjoying this?

She clenched her hands. "Dan—" she turned to her cameraman "—tell everyone to take a break. We'll be back in fifteen minutes."

They were twenty feet away from the set before she directed her first question to Morgan.

"Would you mind explaining to me just what you were doing out there?"

He seemed amused. "Just playing my part, ma'am," he drawled in his best western accent.

"Come off it, Morgan. The way you were delivering your dialogue—it wasn't the way we discussed it the other day."

The change in him was startling. "Are you saying that I don't know how to do my job?" he asked softly. But there was steel in his voice.

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all," she snapped. They were wasting valuable time. "I want you to run through the scene the way I explained it to you. You're meeting Mary Anne—Belinda—for the first time. She's the daughter of the rancher you'll eventually have to fight. But there's a tremendous sexual attraction between the two of you, and I don't think you'd be so hostile immediately. Do you understand?"

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I've been told that I'm very hostile, when all I'm trying to do is convince a particular woman of how sexually attracted I am to her." The look in his eyes left no question about the identity of this particular woman.

Delia averted her gaze, hating herself for the telltale blush she could feel on her cheeks.

"Morgan, I don't care how attracted you are to *anyone*." Especially me. She glared up at him. "We're going back, and you're going to run through that scene the way I want you to. Is that absolutely clear?"

"And if I want to try it another way?"

"I'll listen to you, and if I think it might work, you can try. But I want the scene on film my way first! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly." His response was clipped, frigid.

"Thank you." She spun away from him and began to walk rapidly back to the set.

The rest of the day was one long disaster. Morgan did everything she requested. But it seemed as if some inner light had been extinguished. He just didn't project. Belinda was patient through take after take, but Delia could see the actress was tiring.

The sky was darkening when Dan tapped her shoulder. "I think we'd better wrap it up for the day. We won't get anything else done."

Delia nodded, then bent her head so the older man couldn't see the tears starting. *Toughen up. Fast.*

Blinking the dampness away, she faced him. "Thanks, Dan. You did a good job today."

She touched Belinda's arm gently. "Don't be late for supper. Mary's making fried chicken." She grinned. "You were terrific. It's difficult doing the same lines over and over."

Belinda looked amazed. "I... it's... thank you."

"You take direction well."

"Thanks for being so understanding. It's curious about Morgan, isn't it?"

Delia made no comment, and the young woman continued, unaware of any tension.

"I mean, his work today. Usually he's the one who pulls the rest of us up."

"You've worked with him before?" Delia said.

Belinda nodded. "It was a play in London—his first leading role. I was in the crowd scene, but all of us that could stayed for Morgan's rehears-

als." Her blue eyes sparkled with the memory.

But Delia had stopped listening as her own memories rushed back. She could see Morgan's face, more boyish, more *vulnerable*, as he bounded up the stairs to their flat and caught her in a bear hug. He had told her about the play, about the part. She had gone to see every single performance—except the first. Bad luck for the actor, Morgan had reminded her. She had been so proud of him, and they had been so happy together.

"Will we start with the same scenes tomorrow?" Belinda's voice startled her back to the present.

"Yes. Yes, I think so." They were close to the ranch house now, and Delia noticed Tom by the paddock railing and turned toward Belinda.

"I'm going to talk to Tom just a minute before dinner, but you go on in."

"Thanks, Delia." Belinda started for the house.

Tom's eyes were on Hades, and Delia knew he was trying to figure out the best way to gentle the animal.

"What do you think?" she asked softly.

He grinned slowly. "I'm thinking that devil is going to be quite a handful—but I like them that way!"

"What's the best way of taming an animal like that?" Delia asked nonchalantly. "Suppose you know him pretty well, or think you do, but you still get unexpected trouble?"

Tom narrowed his eyes. "Then I'd make sure he was feeling all right, that he was healthy and rested. But if it's not health, then you have to get to work and make the animal come to you."

"But what do you do?"

"With this one? I'll start tomorrow by going to his stall and offering him a bit of sugar. If he takes it, then we can go on."

Delia felt Tom place his palm on her head and gently ruffle her hair. "Mind you, I'm not suggesting you give Morgan sugar lumps. But then, a man is a different animal altogether."

"You always know, don't you?"

He smiled. "Dan told me you and Morgan had a little talk and the rest of the afternoon was wasted. It's not that hard to figure out."

"If Morgan were a horse . . . What I mean is—"

"What you mean is, how the devil are you going to get the man to respect your direction?"

"That's it exactly."

Tom continued to watch the stallion. "Darling, I'd have a talk with him after dinner. With a full stomach and some good company, he might see reason. Does he know about James?"

"No," Delia admitted. "I don't want anyone to know. I don't want anyone to pity him. I want him to have this last picture just the way it's always been."

"I know." Tom reached into his pocket for a lump of sugar. He took her hand and placed it in her palm.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she reached out her hand as far as she could over the fence, the sugar held flat.

The stallion began to approach, and as he did, she watched his eyes. Big and black, they registered a certain amount of fear, then curiosity.

Delia barely breathed as he came nearer; then, suddenly, she felt velvet lips move over her palm for the sugar.

Daring further, she reached up and patted the silken neck. The stallion

wheeled and trotted to the center of the paddock.

Tom's expression was proud. "You're the first! You see! You help them sense you're not going to hurt them, and they respond." He gave her a brief, hard hug. "Your da will be proud." Without another word, he headed for the barn.

Delia began to walk toward the brightly lit kitchen. Approaching the back door, she almost tripped over the figure sitting on the steps.

"Oh!" Strong male hands caught her by the waist. She found herself looking up at Morgan.

He squinted up at Delia's figure in her tight jeans. She was thinner than when he'd lived with her. He didn't like the slightly worried expression behind her deep blue eyes.

He had thought it was he who was making her so tense. Tonight he knew for sure.

He had caught enough of her conversation with Tom to know she was talking about him. But he had no intention of jeopardizing the picture. They were still right on schedule.

What scared him most was that as a man who placed great value on being in control, he had never felt more out of control in his life. And vulnerable. To her. And to his own feelings.

"What are you doing here?" Delia demanded.

He reached up and took her chin in his hands. "I could ask the same of you. Why don't you watch where you're going?"

She backed away, and he dropped his hand. "Forget it, Morgan. I don't have time to play games with you." She started to brush past him.

"Delia, wait." When she didn't listen, he grabbed her and started to drag her away from the kitchen door.

She didn't make a sound, though she twisted and struggled. Morgan didn't enjoy this. He had simply wanted to talk with her, to try to make her understand what he was feeling. He was having a hard time dealing with his part, with his work obligations. It was time they settled their relationship once and for all.

He eased her up against the barn wall. The bright light from inside spilled across her face. She looked defiant, yet vulnerable.

Morgan studied her face—remembering other places, other times—and without really knowing why, he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers.

She resisted at first. He smiled against her mouth as he felt her begin to respond. Maybe this was a good way to settle their differences. Fires as hot as those that had blazed between them couldn't be dampened. He heard himself groan with pleasure as her mouth began to open underneath his.

Her hands slowly slid up his chest and around his neck as she clasped him against her. The feel of her firm breasts against his chest was a sweet aphrodisiac. He reveled in her closeness, her scent, the feel of her slender body, her trembling warmth. When he heard a small groan escape her lips, the sound excited him further.

"Morgan, no—" Before she could say anything else, he claimed her lips again.

This time he deepened the kiss, slipped his tongue inside her mouth and explored her melting sweetness. She responded in kind.

Morgan felt his hand move, as if with a will of its own. His fingers moved down her shoulder, tenderly caressing, until they cupped her breast. He held her gently, and when she didn't resist, he began to lightly stroke the tip. It was already hard with desire.

She broke the kiss, put her hand over his. "Morgan, no!"

This time he stopped.

He looked down at her face in the dim light. "Delia, we have to talk."

She shrugged her shoulders, tried to extricate herself gingerly. He wouldn't let her go.

"What happened in London?"

Her bright blue eyes were huge pools of disbelief. "Morgan, why are you bringing this up?"

"Because I want to know." He cleared his throat. "Because I loved you, and—" *Because I still love you.*

She was staring at him now as if she thought he was crazy. Her body trembled.

"You're cold." Morgan wrapped her more tightly in his arms. "Let's go inside."

They walked into the warmth and light of the barn. Tom was locking the tack room and heading toward the kitchen. He didn't look up.

Good man, Tom, Morgan thought. He walked quickly, his arm around Delia, until they were inside a vacant stall. Closing the door, he let her go.

"Why did you leave me in London?" he asked.

She looked cornered. "Morgan, you're out of your mind! That was six years ago! Why do we have to discuss the past right now?"

"Because I want to. *Why did you leave me?*" The words came out harsher than he'd intended. She just

gazed at him mutely, and for a moment he thought she was going to run into his arms and surrender. He watched as she came nearer.

"You bastard!" She swung her fist hard enough to connect with his stomach. He doubled over, grunting with surprise. Morgan tried to reach her, but Delia was a fury to be reckoned with.

"Why the hell did I leave *you*? You have nerve, Morgan! You were gone long before I *ever* left! And if you were so much 'in love' with me, why didn't you come after me?" She picked up a handful of straw and threw it at him, then flung herself against his chest.

Morgan stumbled and felt his back hit the hardwood box stall. Suddenly it seemed that everything he'd ever really wanted in life was slipping rapidly away. How could he ever make Delia understand that the intense feelings he had for her had always frightened him? He had to try. Even if, deep inside, he thought he'd fail. Because he'd never deserved the gift that was Delia.

He didn't know what to say, what to do, to re-create what they'd once had. He wanted to ask her to come back to his room and spend the rest of the evening. The rest of her life.

When he raised his gaze to hers, she was staring at him. Her voice was low, almost inaudible. Ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Morgan. I—I went crazy." She looked as if she were about to cry. "It won't happen again."

Before he could reply, she walked quickly out of the stall and down the corridor.

*

DELIA COULD feel her entire body trembling by the time she returned to her room. Locking the door, she dropped down on the bed and buried her face in the pillow.

How could you have responded to his kiss? Now he knew how she felt. Her body, her deepest feelings—she hadn't been able to lie.

It was several minutes before she heard soft knocking. Morgan?

"Who's there?"

"Mary."

She got up and unlocked the door. "I brought you some dinner. I thought you might be tired and would want to eat in your room." Mary's eyes were serene.

"Thanks. How's Dad?"

"Fine. He's sitting by the fire. You might want to come out later. He wants to talk to you."

"Give me an hour." She still had to see the dailies from yesterday's shooting, but they could wait until tomorrow night if James needed her.

JAMES WILDE was lying in a reclining chair, a crocheted afghan around his thin legs. The fire snapped merrily, giving the dimly lit room a golden glow. King, his German shepherd, lay quietly by the chair.

"Hi, Dad." Delia gave her father a quick kiss on his forehead and sat down next to him. "How're you feeling?"

"Not too bad." But his voice sounded rough and tired. James seemed to burn from within. The doctor had told her the cancer was eating him alive. Delia glanced away.

"Tom tells me you're having trouble with Morgan."

Delia's head snapped back up quickly, all her senses alert. "A little bit. But nothing to get worried about."

James laughed softly. "He's a good man, Delia. You need someone strong. Someone who can give you a real run for your money."

"Oh, come on, Daddy!" She could tell the familiar endearment pleased him. He patted her hand.

"I don't want to think about leaving you alone."

The tears were just behind her eyes now.

"Take a good look at Morgan, Delia. He's attracted to you. I could see it if my eyes were closed."

I know. But for all the wrong reasons. "Attracted or not, I wish he'd listen to me on the set."

"He'll respect you in time." James closed his eyes. "He's just having difficulty because you're a beautiful woman."

Delia didn't answer. For a time they sat in front of the fire, bathed in the warmth.

"You remind me of your mother. I called her the other night."

"You did?" She tried to keep the amazement out of her voice. Delia couldn't remember the last time her parents had spoken.

"We talked about you." He reached for her hand this time, as if to prevent her from pulling away. "She told me about Morgan. Don't look so astonished. I'd suspected for a while. Delia, darling, whatever is the matter with you?"

"I'm so sorry, Daddy. It's just—" With an angry gesture she wiped away the tears sliding down her cheeks.

The gentle slapping of house slippers against the hardwood jolted Delia out of her thoughts. Mary came

into the room bearing a tray of freshly baked brownies.

James broke the spell. "Mary, my dear. We were just talking by the fire." He sat up. "How lovely of you to bring tea." It was then that Delia realized the three of them weren't alone. James went on, "Morgan, how nice of you to stop by."

She didn't want to look at him. Not after what had happened in the stable.

James continued, "I was going to call you and ask if you'd mind running lines with me tonight."

She couldn't avoid him any longer without being rude. The words faded as Delia glanced up and saw Morgan's face. His eyes surprised her. Warm, filled with an almost tender light. It was a look she'd never seen before.

When he moved to sit beside her, Delia didn't even flinch; she simply handed him a cup of tea, thinking of the countless times they had performed this intimate ritual in London. Another quick look at his face let her know Morgan remembered, too.

An hour later, Delia leaned back into the couch comfortably. The fire had a somnolent effect, and she felt her eyelids growing heavy. James's and Morgan's voices were somewhere in the background.

"WAKE UP, sleepyhead." Delia heard a soft voice that seemed far away.

"What?" She opened her eyes to find Morgan's face very close to her own. "Where's Dad?"

"He went to bed."

"Oh." Delia stood up and stretched lazily. "I'd better be heading to bed myself. We've got a long day ahead."

Morgan patted the cushions beside him. "Give me a few minutes, Delia. We have to talk."

She eased herself back down on the couch. "Okay." She folded her arms in front of her, as if for protection.

"Delia, I'm having a very hard time working with you on this film."

She felt herself begin to bristle. "It hasn't been easy for me, either, Morgan. But this picture is very important to me." *Could she tell him why?*

"I know you may not believe this, but I never stopped loving you." His dark eyes were intense. "I don't believe you stopped loving me, either." Morgan simply stated it as a fact.

Delia couldn't deny the truth. "Yes." She nodded, her eyes on his face. A soft warmth began blooming deep within her body.

"Come here." He patted the space next to him.

She remained where she was until his hand caught hers, and he pulled gently until she came to rest in his arms. She didn't resist as his fingers tightened in her hair, tilting her head back as his lips moved over hers.

It was a soft kiss, a slow kiss. He was giving her plenty of time to respond. She moved closer and parted her lips to deepen the intimacy between them.

She felt him ease her down on the couch, then slide one leg over both of hers. His lips left hers; his head came up slowly.

"Delia." His voice was tight. "I don't think I can work with you on a professional level with this between us."

Slowly, feeling as if she might break apart at any moment, she got up off the couch and walked over to sit on James's chair by the fire.

"Now tell me, why is it you can't work with me?" She was amazed at how steady her voice sounded when she felt as if her heart were breaking.

"I've never been in love with my director before."

She shook her head. "I'm not buying that, Morgan."

"Why does directing this film mean so much to you?" he asked harshly. "And why are you so unconcerned about how I feel?"

"I'm not unconcerned. It's just impossible for me to get a replacement."

"I could ask Joseph Bates to fly up."

You bastard. Delia stiffened with rage at the mention of their mutual friend. With Joe directing, the film would be nothing but a shoot-'em-up Western. She couldn't do that to James. She wanted to give him one last great character before he died.

"No." She stood up. "I'm sorry. You have to understand, Morgan, that I take my work as seriously as you do."

"Then you may have to find yourself another actor."

"Fine." Delia's voice shook as she walked quickly out of the room. She heard Morgan leave, then went back into the living room to check the fire.

But once in bed, she couldn't sleep. His face, his voice haunted her through the night. He said he loved her. But he couldn't work with her.

There was no answer.

AFTER AN EARLY morning ride, the corral seemed to rush up to meet her—and Morgan stood right beside it. Dismounting, Delia handed the reins to Tom, sure he sensed her need to be alone to talk with Morgan. As man and quarter horse headed for the barn, she faced Morgan.

His expression was that bland, smooth mask she hated. "Did you decide?" he asked.

"There's a flight back to Los Angeles at ten this morning," she re-

plied. "If you can pack by eight, one of the men can run you to the airport."

There might have been a slight stiffening of his body, but his face didn't change at all.

"So you're staying on," he said.

"Yes."

"Why, Delia?"

The hint of pain that had broken through his mask tore at her heart. Delia wanted to tell him. She needed someone to share the painful secret of James's dying.

But she didn't. Instead, she touched him lightly on the arm. "I have to. If I don't do this film, Morgan, I'll never be able to live with myself. Please try to understand."

Before he could reply, the kitchen screen door slammed. James was walking slowly toward them. He had been so delighted when Morgan had agreed to do the film. Now he would have to be told he was leaving.

She didn't say anything as James came up to the rail and leaned companionably next to them. Then she decided to get it over with. "Morgan has something to tell you, Dad."

James turned toward the younger man. "I could certainly use some good news."

For once, Delia noted with satisfaction, *he's shaken*. She'd seen Morgan's eyes widen just a fraction, seen his lips tighten when she'd spoken. The silence seemed to stretch forever. Then finally he spoke. "Delia said we could begin shooting our first scene today."

When his words finally sank in, she put her hand on his arm and gave it the gentlest squeeze.

Thank you, Morgan. For giving us another chance.

"THAT'S A WRAP!" Delia called out, delighted with the results. She looped her arm through her father's and smiled up at him. "You're really cooking."

James was in his element. "It had a lot to do with this man." He gestured to Morgan.

"Thank you, Morgan. That last take was excellent, and I'm sure we're going to use it." Facing everyone, she shouted, "That's it for today! I'll see you all at eight tomorrow morning!"

She turned away from Morgan, concentrating on her father. James looked good today. His deep blue eyes, so like her own, were sparkling. But Delia also knew he had an almost superhuman ability to concentrate on a scene. She didn't know how much longer his strength would last.

She was grateful when Tom clapped James on the shoulder and the two older men headed for the pickup truck Tom had driven out to location.

Delia jumped when she felt a pair of strong warm hands settle on her shoulders.

"I have to admit, you're really pulling it out of him. That was the best I've ever seen James."

"Thank you. You're pretty hot stuff yourself."

He laughed then, throwing back his head and looking more boyish than he had in a long time. "You've got guts, Delia. You may just make it, after all."

She decided to play along, liking this new side of him. Sticking her hands in her back pockets, she grinned. "We'd better hurry if we're going to catch dinner."

He surprised her then. "I thought we might go out to dinner tonight."

She couldn't resist. "Won't Belinda be lonely?"

He mock scowled. "She won't even notice I'm gone."

"Do I get a chance to clean up, or do you want me smelling like a horse?"

His dark eyes were suddenly serious. "I'll take you any way I can get you."

She looked away. "Meet me in the living room in an hour, okay?"

It was the longest hour she'd ever lived through. Delia finally settled on a cranberry hand-knit sweater, a mid-calf length black skirt and boots. Tired of her constant wardrobe of jeans and sweats, she also wanted Morgan to appreciate her as a woman and forget she was his director.

The expression in his eyes was reward enough. He devoured her.

"Don't wait up," she called to Mary. Miraculously, her voice didn't tremble.

They drove into Jackson and chose a steak house where the food was good, solid and unpretentious. After a simple meal of steak and salad, they faced each other over coffee.

"You've changed," he said softly.

"Good or bad?"

"Both. You're more confident. Much more in control than you used to be. I like that."

"Go on."

"But...you seem harder. As if nothing can get to you. And the picture...it's almost an obsession."

"It is," she admitted. "I'll be relieved when it's over."

"Why did you recommend me for the part?" he asked suddenly.

Delia was about to reply that it had been for James. But she wanted to be honest with Morgan.

"I wanted to see you again."

"Did you miss me as much as I missed you?"

She nodded. "I missed you terribly. Why didn't you ever call me?" she asked.

His mouth tightened. "This may still be very hard for you to understand, but I resented who you were terribly. James Wilde's daughter. You had everything in the world. How could I possibly have provided for you? But the one thing I wanted to do more than anything was to ask you to marry me."

She couldn't say anything—she was stunned by his admission. Wanting to hold the moment, she laced her fingers through his and held on tightly as he continued.

"And what could I have offered you? A little flat in London that barely had hot water half the time? I wouldn't have taken any of his money if I'd married you, Delia. I wanted to provide for you. I needed that."

He talked rapidly, quietly, as if he'd missed his chance before and it had stayed all bottled up inside for the past six years. If there was any chance for their future, it had to be said now.

"You had a family, and it was obvious that you were an adored child. I had no family to offer you, not even a bad one. I thought I pulled you down. And I couldn't do that, Delia. Not the way I felt about you."

"Why couldn't you tell me any of this before?"

"I didn't even know most of it consciously. All I knew was that I thought you deserved better, so I did everything in my power to push you out of my life. At the same time, I kept trying to prove myself to you, that I was good enough for you. It was all that ever mattered to me."

"I know that feeling," she said. "I feel that way about my father. And deep inside I feel like I don't always

measure up." Then Delia said softly, "I think we'd better get back. We have a lot to do tomorrow."

THEY PARKED the car outside the garage, then walked slowly toward the house. The stars were bright overhead, and a gentle breeze blew the scent of crisp mountain air around them.

When they reached the kitchen door, Delia stood on the cement step so that she was almost level with his eyes. "I had a wonderful time, Morgan. It meant so much to me that . . . we could talk like that."

He didn't reply, but the pressure of his hand on her arm increased slightly.

"Good night," she whispered. Then she leaned forward and kissed him gently on his cheek.

She heard his quickly indrawn breath; then his arms encircled her and he just held her. She could feel his heart pounding, the warmth of his breath on her neck. Delia wanted to stay with him forever.

"Come back with me."

"Morgan—"

"Not to make love. Just to sleep with me. I want to hold you next to me all night."

She hesitated for a second, but Delia knew it was what she wanted, too. She also knew she was playing with fire.

"I promise," he breathed, "just to hold you."

She slid her arms around his neck, then laid her cheek against his shoulder. "Yes."

He picked her up easily and carried her toward the guest house. Mary had moved Belinda to one of the guest bedrooms in the main house, so Morgan had the little house all to himself.

He maneuvered the door open gently, then carried her over the threshold and into the darkened bedroom.

Delia tensed for just an instant as he laid her down on the bed. Then he sat next to her and began to take off his shirt.

She stood up and began to unzip her skirt, stepped out of it, then drew her sweater over her head and stepped out of her boots. Clad only in her silk slip, bra, bikini and stockings, she turned her back on Morgan and reached behind her for the hook on her bra. As the straps slid down over her upper arms, she saw him lying on the bed, bare chested, watching her.

"You're just as beautiful as I remembered," he said.

She removed her stockings, slip and finally her tiny lace bikini. Feeling strangely shy—hadn't she slept in the same bed with Morgan many times?—she sat down on the edge of the bed. A heartbeat later, she felt his hand on her waist, his fingers warm.

"Climb in. You must be freezing."

She moved underneath the covers, and then he was beside her, his body warm and hard, comforting in the darkness.

"Come here," he whispered.

She turned toward him, burying her face against his chest, loving the feel of his rough hair on her cheek. She sighed softly.

"This is what I missed the most."

Morgan's breath tickled her ear.

"Me, too."

He moved his hand slowly down her back until he cupped her buttocks gently. It was as if he were discovering her body all over again. Though they weren't going to make love, they had time to be truly intimate.

"Thank you for coming back with me."

She kissed the tender skin just underneath his ear. "My pleasure, Morgan."

When she awoke, she was aware of him instantly. He was beside her, his muscled, rough leg entwined intimately with hers. One large hand was splayed over her breast, holding it gently, the other was between her thighs, warm against the smooth skin.

With a soft exhalation, Delia glanced at the bedside clock. Five twenty-three. It was still dark. She tried to move, but their bodies were entwined in such a way that she couldn't.

She moved back against him, trying to ease his hand out from between her thighs, when she felt his strong arousal.

He shifted in his sleep, and his fingers pressed her more intimately. Delia started, then shifted. She'd have to wake him.

"Morgan?" she whispered.

"Hmm?" His voice was still sleepy.

"Could you move your hand for just a second?"

He did, his fingers settling on her waist.

"Your other hand?"

He complied, moving it to her shoulder.

Both touches had been soft, non-sexual. Yet as his hand squeezed her shoulder, Delia knew she wanted him to make love to her.

She raised her thigh gently and reached between her legs to touch him intimately. She trailed her fingertips over the taut flesh, then grasped him more firmly. Shifting in front of him, she brought the tip of his masculinity to her most intimate place.

She felt his hand tighten at her waist; then it slid slowly, luxuriously, to the back of her thigh. He pushed lightly, and she raised her leg a bit more as he shifted his hips behind her and entered her just the tiniest bit.

She groaned at the exquisite sensation. His hand moved again, and she felt his palm pressed firmly against her abdomen, fingers apart. He moved his hand down until one of his fingers was tangled in the soft curls of hair between her thighs. As he found the spot he wanted, he began to move his fingertip over it, slowly. So slowly.

She arched her hips, bringing him more firmly inside her. He groaned, and she felt his hand tighten slightly on her stomach. His other hand eased her head back so his lips could claim hers.

It was the most tender of kisses, his lips soft and warm. She opened her mouth at the same moment he thrust again, gently. She moaned against his mouth, then turned her head away and buried it in the pillow. It felt so good, so right. She had wanted this from the first moment she'd seen him on her father's balcony. This slow sensuality. She wanted Morgan to make her body sing with life.

And she wanted him. More than any man she'd ever known. She wanted him because she loved him. She'd never stopped loving him.

The feeling was the same, but different. She'd made love to him before, but in six years they'd become different people. So it was a combination of old and new. And achingly tender.

She moved her hips back, suddenly hungry for all of him, but his fingers tightened on her stomach, then moved lower. She stopped. His mouth moved to her shoulder, and he bit it gently, sending shivers through her body.

Though she had started their intimacy, he was going to finish it. She felt him move, his motions smooth and graceful as he positioned himself behind her. Then he thrust strongly, once, twice, as he filled her completely, the sensation extremely satisfying. She felt his hand move back down, unerring as he found her again and began to slowly build her excitement. At the same time, his other hand moved underneath her body. She shifted slightly, then sighed as his fingers closed over one of her breasts, the soft, kneading caresses making her nipple pucker and harden.

He took his time, building passion until she thought she would float right out of her body and shatter. As a feeling of inevitability began to overtake her, she heard him whisper against her ear.

"Yes." His voice was still husky with sleep. "So good."

The sound of his voice touched off her response, and she strained against him as she reached her peak. It was a violent culmination for both of them, and she gasped as her body shuddered and finally was still. She could feel his body trembling with the aftermath of their passion.

He kissed her shoulder, then moved back, still inside her but not touching her other than where their bodies were intimately joined. When Delia stopped trembling, she slowly looked over her shoulder at him and smiled.

He moved closer until their bodies touched completely, his front to her back. She heard his labored breathing close to her ear. After several minutes she eased apart from his strong arms, then cradled his head against her breasts.

When he caught his breath, he smiled down at her, then kissed the tip of her nose softly.

"So much for my good intentions," he murmured, nuzzling her. "God, you smell good."

She moved her body against his, delighting in the way they fit so closely together.

He cupped her buttocks and pulled her tightly against him. "It was wonderful." He kissed her cheek. "You don't know how many evenings I've lain awake, wishing you were here with me, making love."

"I've had the same dreams."

"It was better than I remembered," he said, grinning wickedly. "Didn't you say something about an eight o'clock shoot?"

She sat up in bed. "Oh, my God. It's ten after seven!"

"Better get a move on." He got out of bed and stretched. "You have your choice, Delia. A quick shower with me or breakfast."

"So who needs to eat?" she replied quickly.

THE NEXT WEEK passed quickly for Delia. Filming was coming along brilliantly; the chemistry between James and Morgan was perfect. Delia let them have their heads, and she knew that she was seeing film history in the making: Neither actor had ever been this outstanding in a role before.

If her days were filled with filmmaking, her nights were filled with lovemaking. It was an unspoken agreement between Morgan and herself. No commitment had been made, but she moved in a few of her clothes. They spent evenings together at the house with James. Delia watched the way her father would laugh as Mor-

gan made his early days in the London theater come alive.

For a brief time, James was filling the role of the father Morgan had never known; Morgan the son James had never had. There was laughter and warmth in their evenings together, and Delia was content to sit back and watch the two men dearest in the world to her enjoy each other's company.

Many evenings, Morgan would ask James to get out the videocassettes he had of his older films. They would watch James's performances, and Morgan would ask countless questions. Delia watched as James patiently explained what he thought had made a scene work, and why. And she sensed her father's contentment. He was passing something on to Morgan, and perhaps in that sense, he wouldn't die.

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"QUIET!" Delia's voice was low, but it carried perfectly. The set was closed today; only the minimum number of crew were present. Today was the scene the entire film rested upon—James's confrontation with Morgan.

She had tried to film the scene on Monday and Tuesday, but Mary had forewarned her that James wasn't feeling well. So Delia had juggled her scenes and ended up directing Morgan and Belinda. But today James felt better, and Delia knew it was time.

James and Morgan looked at each other for a second; then Morgan nodded his head slightly. Delia picked up the signal, and the cameras began to roll.

Delia willed herself to remain calm, but her nails were biting into her palms. *Please, let him be able to do the scene.* She had already looked through

the lens. The weather was perfect, early summer in all its glory.

She could hear Morgan delivering his lines angrily, letting James know he was going to take Belinda whether he wanted him to or not. Morgan caught fire every time he shared a scene with James, and he was doing brilliantly today. When you watched Morgan act, you forgot he was playing a part.

"Cut. That's it." When the cameras stopped rolling, Delia ran to her father.

"Dad, that was—"

"I'm tired, Delia. Could you walk me to the trailer?"

She held his hand tightly and put her arm around his shoulders as she led him toward one of the trailers they'd set up on the edge of the clearing.

Once inside, James lay down, and Delia poured him a glass of water.

"Drink this." For the first time in his long illness, she was scared. He held her arm as he drank.

The soft knock on the door stopped her thoughts, and she eased James back on the bed.

Morgan stood at the door, a look of concern on his face. "Is James all right? He seemed—"

"He's tired." Delia stepped outside and closed the trailer door softly behind her. She didn't want any rumors, anything to harm the film. She was almost finished, and then she could devote full time to James.

"Please, Delia, don't shut me out."

Did he know? Delia decided to share as much as she could. "He's getting old, and...Morgan, he can't give over all that energy and not feel the strain. Not at his age."

"Tell me how I can help you."

"Find Tom. Bring him here. Ask him to drive the truck as close as he can."

Without another word he vanished around the side of the trailer.

Delia went back to her father and laid her fingers against his cheek. The skin was thin, his color bad. An understanding of what was going to happen to him ripped through her body, searing her with a pain so intense she couldn't move.

"MORGAN, wake up!"

He shot up in bed, his body covered with sweat. He reached for Delia and drew her against him. *She's still here.*

"You're shaking!" She drew him down against her, cradling him in her arms as if he were a small child. He buried his face against her shoulder, ashamed she should see him this way.

"What's wrong?" She touched his shoulder.

"A dream . . . it's stupid. Nothing."

"It had to be something for you to be crying out like that. Tell me, Morgan."

When he didn't say anything, she whispered, "Let me be strong for you."

"I feel like such a . . . fool."

"No. You can tell me anything, Morgan."

"Tell me what's going to happen after filming is finished."

"You mean us?" she whispered.

"Yes."

She put her arms around his neck and moved her body against his. "I don't know. I just know I want us to be together," she said softly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I can't take it a second time."

"Was that what you were dreaming about?"

He nodded.

She kissed his cheek, then his lips. "I'll never leave you. I couldn't if I wanted to. I love you so much, Morgan, it's like you're a part of me."

He sighed, then hugged her tightly. "You're the only good thing that's ever happened to me. I want you to know that."

She answered him with a kiss, and he responded, wanting to be as close to her as possible. Wanting to know that when he woke in the morning she would still be beside him.

BUT HE couldn't sleep that night, so he left the warmth of their bed and silently walked toward the barn. When would Delia trust him enough to tell him what was on her mind? They were so close in so many ways—their talks, their lovemaking—yet there was still one more bridge to be crossed. There was an important part of her she kept separate from him. And he wanted to share her problems as well as her happiness.

Over and over he thought of what it might be. Directing the film was a big step in her career. Did she think she wasn't up to it? She brought something special to the film that all the actors had responded to. A caring, a perspective that was totally devoid of personal ego. If he was honest with himself, Morgan had to admit she was one of the best directors he'd ever worked with.

Her father? But he'd asked her, and Delia had said he was simply not as strong as he'd once been. And Delia wasn't the sort of person to worry about something without reason.

Their relationship? He frowned. Perhaps she was worried about what was really going to happen.

That had to be it. It had been difficult at first for both of them. But she had made the first step, had sent the script over, invited him to her father's party. She had been the first to put her heart on the line.

You still don't think you're good enough for her. Admit it. Though he had amassed a fortune, built a career that was astounding in its breadth and scope, he still felt he never quite measured up. Delia was an unattainable goal.

He remembered the feelings of inadequacy that had flooded him when they'd talked about their childhoods. Delia had told him stories of French finishing schools, skiing trips to Gstaad, vacations on the Riviera. She'd been in the news from the time she was born, on a movie set before she knew how to walk.

He'd been fighting to stay alive.

He walked around the corral slowly, trying to decide what he was going to do. By the fifth time around, he'd decided.

Let her make the decision. Ask her to get married. You make the commitment, and have the guts to see if she'll have you.

Being here in Wyoming with Delia and her family had brought him to this decision. They were good people, and he could only hope some of that goodness had rubbed off on him. It made him understand how Delia had turned out the way she had. Including her mother, Danielle, whom he had met once in Paris, Delia had been shaped by a remarkable array of people.

When he walked silently back into his bedroom, Delia was still asleep. He undressed and got into bed beside her. But he didn't touch her. He simply looked at her for a long time before he finally fell asleep.

DELIA RINSED the soapsuds from the large pot Mary had made chili in, then set it to dry. She welcomed the mindless routine of the chore, wanted to blank out the future.

James had finished the picture. But giving out all that energy had cost him. Mary was by his side constantly, except when Tom took over briefly. Delia rushed to him at the end of each shooting day and spent weekends with him.

I should have never attempted it. Yet the second the thought came to her, she dismissed it.

The kitchen door opened, and she turned to see Morgan come in. He unbuttoned his jacket but kept it on.

"Working hard?" His voice was gentle.

"I just finished. Why weren't you at dinner?"

"I had an errand to do in town."

"Would you like some coffee and apple pie?"

"Only if you sit with me."

She cut him a piece of Mary's pie and poured him a cup of coffee.

"Did you eat anything tonight?"

"I grabbed a hamburger in town."

He set down his fork and put a hand over hers.

"I'm going in to see James. Would you like to come with me?" Delia asked.

"Take a walk with me first." His eyes were burning with a peculiar intensity as they stepped outside.

They walked until they were on the far side of the fence; then Morgan stopped. He cupped her face in his hands and spoke softly. "I want you to think about this before you answer."

She looked up at him, puzzled. For just an instant his face looked more vulnerable than she'd ever seen it.

"I love you very much, Delia. Will you marry me?"

Of all the things she'd thought he was going to ask her, this was the very last. She stared at him for a long moment, then started to smile.

"Yes." The last of their problems could be worked out with love.

He stepped closer so that their bodies were touching and lowered his head to kiss her. It was the sweetest of kisses, almost shy. He surprised her once again.

"I'm glad you said yes." He laughed shakily. "I didn't have anything planned if you'd said no."

"How could you even think I'd refuse you!"

When she was able to think coherently again, she grasped his sleeve. "Let's tell James and Mary."

They headed back toward the ranch house.

James was sitting by the fire, Mary at his side knitting a sweater.

"Dad?" Delia called softly.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her as she sat down next to him. "Morgan and I are going to get married."

He looked as if he hadn't heard her for a moment; then his face creased into a smile, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were suspiciously bright.

"I give you both my blessing." He included Morgan in the loving look he gave Delia. "I was hoping this would happen." He sat up in his chair, and

energy seemed to fill his body. "Mary, we need champagne, and where's Tom? This calls for a toast." Extending his hand, he clasped Morgan's firmly. "Welcome to the family, son."

Morgan sat next to Delia, and it seemed as if tension were leaving his body. She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. Living totally for the moment, Delia basked in the warmth of the room.

Once the champagne had been poured, James raised his fluted glass. "To Morgan and Delia. May your marriage be filled with warmth and laughter, love and happiness. May you be a constant source of joy and strength to each other. May you always take care of each other. Delia, I love you very much. Morgan, there isn't another man in the country I would rather my daughter marry. Thank you for the good news." Soon the room was bubbling with conversation.

Morgan touched her arm. "I didn't give you your ring yet," he said softly.

"You bought a ring?" she asked. "When?"

"This afternoon." He handed her a small velvet box.

Delia opened it slowly, then caught her breath. An exquisitely cut, sparkling diamond.

"Oh" was all she could say.

He slid the ring on her finger. A perfect fit.

"How did you know my size?"

"Mary. I asked her this morning."

When Delia looked up at her stepmother, she saw her tears. "Thank you, Delia. This means so much to both of us. Morgan, you have no idea how happy I am."

Delia watched as Morgan kissed Mary softly on her cheek, then shook

hands with Tom. Her father, sitting back in his chair, fairly glowed with contentment.

They stayed for an hour; then Mary signaled Delia with her eyes that James was tiring.

"We're going to leave you to your fire," Delia announced. "I'll see you all in the morning."

She kissed Mary and Tom good-night, then knelt by her father. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said softly, then kissed his cheek.

"Good night, my princess." Delia felt her throat tighten. He hadn't used her pet name in years. "I love you."

She squeezed his hand. "Always, Daddy."

"Morgan," her father said softly. "Take good care of her. I'm entrusting her to you."

"I will."

"Make her happy. Don't let her brood too much. And never let a day go by without telling her how much she means to you."

"Dad!" Delia was embarrassed.

"I will."

DELIA DIDN'T sleep well that night, and was awake by five. Knowing she wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, she got up and began to dress.

"Where are you going?" Morgan asked sleepily.

"Out to see the sunrise."

"Want some company?"

"I'd like that a lot."

Once outside, they walked over to the corral and faced the mountains. The sky was dark lavender, the palest tinge of sunlight visible at the edge of the horizon.

"Beautiful," Morgan murmured.

Delia tucked her hand in his arm and leaned against him. She heard some

noise from the barn; then Falstaff came galloping into the corral, his large hooves thundering. He neighed, and the noise came out an angry squeal.

Tom joined them at the rail. "I don't know what's gotten into him. He was restless all night."

Falstaff came up to the rail and snorted. Delia began to pat the silken head. "It's okay, boy. It's okay." She pitched her voice low, and it seemed to quiet the animal.

The sun was rising now, washing the pale morning light with tinted hues of pink and gold.

"There's nothing like this anywhere in the world," Delia said softly to Morgan.

They watched the sunrise silently. Falstaff trotted back to the far end of the corral and began to buck, hooves kicking against the fence. The harsh sound carried in the still morning air.

"Hey, now!" Tom leaped into the corral and began to run toward the horse.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," she said to Morgan. "He's usually—"

"*Delia!*" Mary stood on the kitchen steps. Even from a distance Delia could see that her face was contorted with pain.

No.

Her heart began to pound, and she started to walk, then run, toward her stepmother.

MORGAN STOOD frozen at the fence as realization came crashing down around him.

He was dying. My God. She made the film because he was dying.

Tom was at the fence moments after Delia left. Tears were running down his

face, and he made no attempt to disguise his grief.

"God be with you, James Wilde," he said.

"I'm entrusting her to you." James's words came back to Morgan with new meaning. They were not simply the words of a pleased father-in-law; he had asked Morgan to take care of his daughter for all time.

*

THE REST OF the day had an air of unreality. Once the ambulance came and took James away, Delia wandered around the ranch house, wondering how everything could still look the same. The sun was high in the sky, the weather serene. Several quarter horses still grazed out in the paddock, and Hades pranced restlessly in the corral.

Morgan stayed by her side constantly. While Tom comforted Mary, Delia was conscious of Morgan watching over her. He looked awful; his face was pale, his eyes dark with pain. Yet he answered phone calls, talked to neighbors as they dropped by with casseroles, salads, loaves of homemade bread—all sorts of food-stuffs. Delia felt detached from it all, yet the people in the valley were a great comfort to Mary. As they kept coming in the door, offering help in any way they could, Delia realized how many friends James and Mary had, how much they were loved.

Early that evening, as the sun began to set, Delia walked out to the corral. She had to get away from the endless condolences. Somehow she felt closer to her father when she walked the land.

Falstaff was out behind the barn in one of the paddocks. When he saw her, he began to walk slowly toward the rail.

Delia scratched behind his ears absently. The thought of her father never riding his favorite horse again brought quick, stinging tears to her eyes, but she pushed them back. She couldn't cry for James. Not yet.

She heard quiet footsteps behind her.

"Are you coming in for dinner?" Morgan asked.

She concentrated on patting Falstaff. "No. I'll eat something later."

"Delia, tell me how to help you."

Her restless hand stilled, but only for a moment. "I've been thinking, Morgan." She cleared her throat. "There is something. I want to finish the film."

"Do you have enough footage of your father?"

She nodded. "I knew we wouldn't have much time once we got here. I wanted to film the exteriors, and we just made it."

"So the principal work left is with Belinda and me."

"Yes."

He squeezed her arm gently. "Then we'll do it. Whatever it takes, we'll finish the film."

She put her hand over his. "Thank you, Morgan."

THE NEXT two weeks seemed to fly by, and Morgan remembered them as a time of hard work and feverish intensity. He watched Delia, and it seemed to him the film consumed her. She barely took time to eat or sleep.

His and Belinda's final scenes caught fire, the emotions blazing between their characters. There was no safety net for the risks they took as actors. It was James's death, Morgan was certain, that gave their performances such

a fine edge. He had given them all a chance to see their own mortality.

The morning they left for Los Angeles, Morgan got up early and showed, then headed out toward the barn. He stopped at the corral, watching as Hades circled the enclosure restlessly.

Tom had worked miracles in the time he'd trained the Arabian. The animal was beginning to trust again. Quite an achievement.

Mary came out and joined him at the rail. She was silent for a moment.

"I want to wait a while before the funeral," she said quietly. "James asked me to scatter his ashes at the foot of the mountains." She gazed at the horizon. "I won't have it turned into one of those celebrity circuses, but I would like it very much if you would come back with Delia."

He was touched.

"What will happen when you and Delia go back to Los Angeles?" she asked.

Morgan sighed. "We're into the home stretch. She has to edit the film, then show the final cut to the studio."

"When will it be over for her?"

"A director's involved with every stage of production. The film will have to be edited, then dubbed. Delia said it could take up to eight weeks—if she's lucky. It's supposed to be a Christmas release, and it must be, to qualify for next year's Academy Awards. She'll just get it in under the wire."

Mary's eyes were worried as she watched Hades. "I don't like the way she looks."

"I don't, either. I wish she'd eat more. She sleeps, but she still seems tired."

"You're going to have to take care of her these next few months. Maybe even until the picture opens."

"I know." He hesitated for a moment, then decided to confide in Mary. "She doesn't seem to be... it's as if she's keeping all her feelings locked away. You seem to have mourned James, let him go. I keep sensing Delia hasn't let any of her feelings out."

Mary smiled, but her eyes remained sad. "They had a difficult relationship, James and Delia. He wanted to be a good father so desperately, but in the earlier years he barely knew how. And then, as his fame grew, it became harder and harder for Delia to be his daughter."

He gripped the rail tightly. "Did Delia ever tell you that we knew each other before?"

"I knew. She came back to the ranch when she left you. James was on location, so it was just the two of us."

"I never meant to hurt her. I wanted to marry her, take care of her."

"I know you did. I know you loved each other very much."

"Just as she had trouble being James's daughter, I had trouble accepting who she was. I had this crazy idea she might think I wanted to use her. When we started seeing each other, I had no idea who she was. Only that I cared for her."

Mary put her hand over his and squeezed.

"I... pushed her away from me before she had a chance to... But I wanted to build a life with her, but first—"

"First you had to be a success."

He wasn't surprised she understood.

"Sometimes I wonder if we'll ever find a time to simply be together, if we'll even marry. Both times I've been with Delia we've been caught up in the middle of something crucial."

She patted his arm. "You'll have that time. You must have faith, Morgan. Faith that things will work out." She smiled up at him, her eyes serene. "You love her very much, and once the film is over, you'll both find a way."

"I promise you I'll take care of her, Mary."

"I know you will. Now let's get both of you on that plane."

MORGAN LISTENED to the shower running as he toweled his hair dry in the bedroom.

Only one more night of this lunacy and it will be over.

He'd grown to hate the film because of what it had done to Delia. The last week had been the worst. The film was right on schedule; it had been finished exactly eight weeks after they flew back from Wyoming.

She seemed to come to life only at the studio, and then it was by sheer effort of will. He'd come to expect her mood swings, from her jittery, wired high to the lethargic, empty low. He'd continued to bring her food but hadn't had the heart to stay around and make sure she ate it.

She's a big girl, he thought, his mood foul. *She can take care of herself.*

The minute he saw her step into their bedroom, he admitted the lie.

As she slowly unwound the thick blue towel, he studied her surreptitiously.

Too thin. Too pale. One more night. He could put up with anything, knowing he would soon have Delia back the way she'd been before.

He dressed quickly, slipping on his jeans, shirt and sweater. Industry people usually went to screenings after work, so the dress code was casual. All

anyone cared about was whether the film worked.

Delia was wearing what he teasingly referred to as her Japanese coolie outfit. Full pants, cropped short. Soft cotton in a brilliant shade of royal blue, with a matching tank top. Now she was studying her reflection in the mirror, and he could tell she wasn't pleased.

Her arms are too thin.

She reached for her jacket and slipped it on, concealing them.

Her hair was drying naturally, wavy and full. She rushed through the minimum amount of makeup, then reached for her bag.

"Ready?" she asked.

He nodded. She walked toward him, her flat sandals noiseless against the deep carpeting. There was nothing to trip her, but she stumbled against him, and he caught her by her upper arms.

Even through the jacket he could feel her. Burning up.

Delia didn't resist as he pulled her slowly toward him, turning her so they were face-to-face. Her color was high, her eyes dilated. Why hadn't he seen it before? Because they hadn't been sleeping in the same bed.

"How long have you been sick?" he asked.

"I can make it through—"

"How long?"

She lowered her eyes, and he loosened his hold. "Just the last few days. But I slept in the limo on the way home, and I feel better—"

He felt her forehead. Burning. "Like hell you do. I'm taking your temperature. Damn it, Delia, don't you care what you do to yourself?"

"We don't have time! We have to be at the studio—"

"No, we don't."

"I told Bob we'd—"

"I don't give a damn what you told Bob."

"*I have to be there!*" She crossed the room to the door, but he grabbed her and half dragged, half carried her to the bed.

She began to cry. "Don't do this, Morgan."

He put his cheek against her hot skin. "Delia, you're in no condition to go tonight. Call it off."

Her body tensed. "I can't." There was a note of desperation in her voice. "The vice-president of advertising is going to be there, all the publicity people . . . Morgan, I can't just cancel the screening! It has to be a Christmas release to qualify for—"

"I don't give a damn. They can all wait one week."

"Spoken like a spoiled, egotistical star! You're so used to getting everything your way you can't take anyone else into account. Damn you, Morgan, I'm going to this screening if I have to crawl there on my hands and knees."

The film had become her life.

He decided to try one last time.

"Let him go, Delia," he said softly.

"Let James go. The film isn't going to bring him back." He hated saying the words and for a moment she almost crumpled.

But she stiffened when she heard the knock on the door.

"Bob." She looked up at him, an imploring expression on her face. "Please, Morgan. Just give me tonight? I won't ask for anything else. Ever."

She was going to go.

Delia stepped back, away from him, opened the door and walked out.

MORGAN SLIPPED into the back row just as the lights went down in the small studio screening room. Delia was in the third row, seated next to Bob. He'd caught a glimpse of her blue jacket before the lights dimmed.

The air conditioning was too high. Delia was freezing and Bob had taken off his jacket and draped it around her shoulders.

But Delia still couldn't get warm.

She concentrated on the screen in front of her as her vision of the film began to unroll, frame by frame.

There was total silence when James first appeared on screen, and Delia studied him. *Perfect*. The first shot, his first words. She knew instinctively that the only way she'd ever get through this evening was by looking at the film dispassionately. He wasn't James Wilde, her father, but a character in a film.

She shivered and pulled Bob's jacket closer around her. Though she was cold, she was sweating. Bob put his arm around her and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"James is wonderful. Delia, thank you for giving him this."

His words were her total undoing. She tried to study the screen again, but the images blurred.

The first sob tore out of her body, loud in the quiet theater. She covered her mouth with her hands as her shoulders began to shake. Bob tightened his hold, the gentle pressure a lifeline.

Delia made it through the first hour without breaking down again. And she knew she'd been privileged to work on a masterpiece. Morgan and James set fire to each other, each actor making the other reach higher, dare more. As Delia watched both men she loved, her

hand over her mouth, her eyes filled with tears.

By the time James's climactic scene was reached, she was a quaking bundle of nerves. It seemed like only a few days ago that she'd helped her father walk to his trailer. But even then she'd known. It was the scene of a lifetime.

As James talked on about Mary Anne, his cinematic daughter, Delia felt her tenuous control snapping.

I can't take any more of this.

She put her hands over her face and began to sob. This time she couldn't stop. The audience was perfectly quiet, utterly engrossed in the film, but also respecting Delia's grief. Everyone knew what she'd gone through after her father's death to get this film ready in time for a Christmas release.

THE LIGHTS came up, and Delia wiped her hands over her wet face. The tears were streaming down her face; she couldn't make them stop.

People were coming by.

"Beautiful film, Delia."

"Bob, it's going to be a hit. I can feel it."

"James was wonderful."

Voices swirled around her, but all she could think of was what an utter mess her life was.

Watching Morgan's last scene with Belinda, she'd remembered that day's filming. He'd kissed her, given the scene to her, come back with her to Los Angeles and put up with eight weeks of insanity so that she could finish her dream.

What had she given him back? She'd snapped at him, stopped listening—she'd done everything wrong it was possible to do in a relationship.

Her body felt unbearably tired, but she pushed herself out of her seat. Call him. *Tell him how much you love him.*

Delia felt as if she were swimming through a sea of thick, humid air. She was no longer sweating; she felt as if she were being burned alive. There were too many bodies, too close. And her legs weren't working. She looked out into the sea of faces, and for an instant she thought she saw Morgan rushing down the aisle toward her, pushing people out of the way.

Then her legs gave way, and she fell.

SHE WOKE UP in an ambulance, Morgan's tense face close above hers.

When she opened her eyes again, she was in a hospital bed, the smell of antiseptic and alcohol strong in her nostrils.

"Morgan?" The word was barely a whisper. "Don't leave me. Please." The words were harsh and raw against her throat.

"I'm not going to leave," he said quickly.

There was someone else in the room. Turning her head, she saw a doctor standing on the other side of her bed.

She looked away from him, toward Morgan. She had to tell him now, all the reasons she loved him, before she fell asleep.

"I was wrong, Morgan. What I did." She tried to sit up but was astonished to find an IV running out of her arm. She searched for his face.

"I was wrong to go tonight—"

"Delia, stop—"

"It was stupid. You were right. I never meant to hurt you, but I've been awful—"

"Delia, the doctor's going to give you a shot to make you sleep. I don't want you to worry about anything."

"Don't leave me." She clung to his hand, her eyes smarting. "Please, Morgan, stay with me."

Scared of needles, she looked at Morgan as she felt it prick her skin.

"I love you." It was the last thing she said before she fell asleep.

*

EARLY MORNING sunshine spilled over the redwood deck of Morgan's beach house. Delia gazed out over the ocean, totally content.

Her picture had swept the Academy Awards. Best actor, Morgan Buckmaster. A special award for lifetime achievement given to James Wilde.

Best director, Delia Wilde.

It had been a night of wild celebrating, and she and Morgan had gone to every party in town. They'd danced the night away, driving home just before dawn.

But she couldn't sleep. She'd slipped out of her backless cowl dress and put on her pink robe. Morgan had gone into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

So much had happened since the screening. She'd only been hospitalized for a week; then Morgan had driven her back to his beach house.

They were married exactly one week later at the ranch. It had been a quiet ceremony, with only Tom, Mary, Bob and a few other very close friends present.

He'd taken her away to Tahiti for a month. And it was while nestled in a private bungalow that they really began to talk to each other.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard the glass door behind her slide open.

"I thought I'd find you out here," he said, handing her a cup of coffee.

He looked as wired as she felt and had changed out of his tuxedo into a pair of faded jeans.

They drank their coffee in silence, grateful for the respite from their partying. When Delia set her cup down, she looked up at him.

"So what do you want to do, Best Actor?" she teased.

He took the last sip of his coffee before answering, "I just want to be with you."

She smiled as he traced her cheekbone with his finger. "So what do you want to do, Best Director?"

"Funny. I just want to be with you, too."

His mouth quirked upward. "At last, we agree on something." He was silent for a minute, just holding her as they stood by the redwood railing.

"Are you tired?" she asked.

"Not particularly."

She leaned back in the circle of his arms. "What do you want to do? I mean, right now?"

He kissed her cheek. "You're the director."

She ran her hands up over his bare shoulders, up into the softness of his hair. "Give me a minute. I'm sure I'll think of something."

She teased him, touching him as long as possible, then finally exerted the gentlest of pressures and brought his lips close to hers.

"I think you should kiss me," she said softly.

It was a light, playful kiss, perfectly in tune to the moment.

When he lifted his head, she glanced up at him. "Do you make a habit of sleeping with all your directors?"

He swatted her bottom. "Just this one." He kissed her again.

She couldn't think when he broke the second kiss; could only rub her cheek against his chest.

Morgan's voice held a hint of laughter in it. "Where do you think this next scene should take place?"

"Oh, the bedroom. Unless you want to shock the neighbors."

"And what's my motivation?"

As he swept her up into his arms, she kissed the tip of his nose. "You have to answer that one." She looped her arms around his neck as he stepped inside and began to walk toward their bedroom.

"My motivation? I love you, Delia Wilde. I love you very much."



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #23
Vol.5 No.3**

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CANDACE SCHULER

Designing Woman



Daphne Granger and Adam Forrest had been married before and thought it was over. But when they meet again, second thoughts are on both of their minds.



“Now that’s what I call a gorgeous man.” Elaine Prescott turned from the gap in the stage curtains. “There’s a tall blond hunk out there among all those doctors,” she announced above the noise of the models and technicians scurrying around backstage.

Daphne Granger was used to her assistant’s frequent exclamations regarding the opposite sex and didn’t even bother to look up from the loops of corded silk and beads she was arranging around the waist of a volunteer model.

“Is he over six feet?” asked Suzie, one of the professional models. She stood an even six feet tall in her stockings.

Elaine peeked out. “At least,” she affirmed. “And he has shoulders like a football player. Great hair. Terrific tan,” she reported. “And a smile to *die* for.”

Daphne half listened as she gave a final tweak to the belt she was arranging and stepped back. “You look terrific, Mrs. Danvers,” she pronounced.

The woman nodded and walked to her place in the line of models who were about to stage a charity fashion show for Children’s Hospital of San Francisco.

Daphne had been roped into this by her oldest, best and most endearingly eccentric friend, Sunny McCorkle. Not that she minded, since the proceeds were earmarked for new equipment for the hospital. And, besides, it was fun—almost like the old days when she and Sunny had both been protesters on be-

half of a cleaner environment, as well as sisters in the fight for equality of the sexes. Now, as then, Daphne worked in the background while Sunny held center court with a microphone in her hand.

Pulling her thoughts away from Sunny, Daphne glanced at Elaine and Suzie, giggling and whispering, their eyes still glued to the gap in the curtains.

“Come on, you two, quit drooling and get to work. We’re on in less than five minutes.”

“Who goes on first?” someone asked.

Daphne glanced down at her clipboard and back up at the empty place in the line of beautifully dressed women in the silks and satins and glitter of evening wear. “Kali should be first in line.” She looked around the room.

“I’m here, Daphne. Don’t panic.” A strikingly beautiful black woman rushed to her place, the pale pink silk of her bat-winged dress billowing as she moved.

“Now when have you ever seen me panic?” Daphne smiled and cocked her head, holding one hand up for silence. The squeal of a microphone being adjusted was clearly audible. “Oh, damn! Sunny’s announcing me already.” Daphne thrust her clipboard at Elaine.

“Just take a deep breath, Daphne,” Elaine advised.

“Makeup okay?” Daphne tilted her face to the light.

“Gorgeous,” Elaine assured her.

Daphne always looked gorgeous. There was no way that anyone with her cheekbones could be anything else. That she also had wide golden-brown eyes, a delicately chiseled jawline and a neck like Audrey Hepburn didn't hurt, either.

"And my dress?" Daphne's soft apricot silk evening dress with its wide boat neck and long, full sleeves gathered at the wrist with a narrow ring of crystal beads suited her peaches-and-cream skin to perfection. A corded belt of bright coral silk and more crystal beads accented the simple dress beautifully.

"The dress is lovely. Your hair looks great," Elaine said, eyeing the short, gently tousled hairdo, its color somewhere between aged bourbon and pale golden sherry. "Your notes are on the podium," she added.

Daphne entered from stage right to polite applause and took her place. Surprisingly, Sunny didn't mouth any of the pleasantries that were usual on such an occasion. Instead, she gave Daphne's hand a squeeze, winked one huge chocolate-brown eye, and scampered offstage before Daphne could thank her for the lovely introduction.

Daphne thanked her anyway, then took a deep breath and smiled, willing the butterflies in her stomach to settle down. She really hated this part of a fashion show, preferring to manage things backstage and let her designs speak for themselves. But this was a charity function and the audience expected to see her.

"Good evening, everyone," she began, her husky voice made more so by nervousness. "Tonight you'll be seeing some of the newest evening designs from my Night Lights collection. The gowns are—" Daphne stopped suddenly in midspiel.

Elaine's "gorgeous hunk"—it could be none other—was sitting almost directly in front of the podium. His eyes were fastened intently on Daphne's face.

She blinked once and looked again. *It can't be*, she thought, her eyes wide. But she knew beyond a doubt that it was Adam.

No wonder Sunny had been in such a hurry to get off the stage! She had probably invited him.

"Daphne!" Elaine hissed at her from the wings.

Daphne glanced toward stage right, focusing on her agitated assistant. "And, uh, now," she improvised, "here to describe the fashions is my very capable and, uh, lovely assistant, Elaine Prescott." She motioned for the other woman to join her.

Elaine hurried out, automatically smiling at the crowd as Daphne introduced her again.

Daphne mimed confusion as she turned away from the audience, and thrust the cue cards into Elaine's hands. Then she walked backstage.

"Daphne, are you all right?" Suzie was the first to reach her.

"Where's Sunny?" Daphne demanded. "I want to wring her neck."

"Huh?"

"The tall busty redhead in the gold lame," Daphne said.

"Oh, Mrs. McCorkle. She went that way." Kali pointed toward the backstage exit. "Fast."

"Coward!" Daphne muttered. Then she turned, glancing at the models. "Why are you all just standing around? You're on, Kali," she instructed, nodding toward the stage.

The black woman instantly assumed the haughty, elegant expression of the professional runway model and glided onstage.

"Our next model this evening is Mrs. Beth Garwood, the wife of Dr. Arthur Garwood..." Elaine's voice was well modulated and professional but Daphne barely heard it.

She peered around the edge of the curtain. Adam's golden blond hair made him easy to pick out. Dr. Brian McCorkle, Sunny's husband, was at the same table. Sunny's seat was empty.

Suddenly, as if feeling her eyes upon him, Adam half turned and looked over his shoulder. There was a puzzled expression on his handsome face as Daphne hastily tucked herself farther behind the concealing material.

He still looked the same, she thought, daring to peek again. Oh, he was older, of course. Who wasn't? But his hair hadn't changed at all. It was still thick and straight and the color of ripe, golden wheat. From what she could see, he had managed to keep his physique, too. He still looked more like the football player that Elaine had tagged him than a successful doctor.

It was those shoulders and that build that had first attracted her to him. He had just been coming out of the entrance of Harding Park, near the university, clad in battered running shoes and blue shorts. A sweat-soaked terry headband had held his hair out of his face, and there was a gleam of hard physical exertion covering his body. He was as beautiful as a young Greek god and Daphne had been so enthralled by the sheer male beauty of him that she actually ran into him with her bicycle.

Lord, but he had been angry! For the first few minutes, anyway. She had, after all, knocked him down and left tread marks across the toe of his right sneaker. It had taken half a dozen apologetic smiles and the promise of a date before he forgave her.

Daphne sighed. Where had all the time gone? *Adam will be thirty-seven in a couple of weeks*, she thought. *I turned thirty-one this year.* And in just two months it would be eleven years since their divorce.

"Daphne, what happened out there?" Suzie put her hand on Daphne's arm. "Are you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Daphne smiled a little wryly. "I guess I have, sort of." She nodded toward the audience. "See that blond hunk of yours out there?"

Suzie peeked around the curtain. "Uh-huh. Yummy."

"He's my ex-husband."

The model's head snapped around. "Really? I didn't know you'd ever been married to anyone but Miles." Her look became frankly curious. "You must have been awfully young."

"I was eighteen," Daphne said softly, thinking of the way they had eloped.

It had been her idea. Adam had wanted to wait until they could "afford" to get married, until he was out of med school and into his internship, at least. But Daphne didn't want to wait. And, in the end, neither did he.

Maybe it would have been better if they had waited, she thought. But it was too late now.

"I was twenty when he filed for divorce," she added softly.

"Oh," Suzie said. "Gee, I'm sorry, Daphne."

"Oh, don't be." Daphne shook off her reverie. "It was a long time ago."

"Did you know he was going to be here tonight?"

Daphne shook her head. "I'd heard that he was doing his residency in plastic surgery at some hospital in L.A. But that was, oh, five or six years ago. He always said he intended to establish his practice in San Francisco." She

sighed softly and picked up the clipboard, her mind back on the business at hand.

"You have one more dress after that, right, Suzie?" she said.

The model nodded and Daphne turned to watch her parade out onto the stage. The tall, lanky model seemed to float down the runway.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, concludes our fashion show for this evening," Elaine said finally. "What do you say we give a big round of applause to our lovely models?" she continued as they all began to file out for the finale.

"Let's get the designer of these fabulous clothes out here, too, shall we?" Elaine continued.

Daphne had known the words were coming, as Elaine turned to the wing where she was standing, adding her applause to that of the audience.

Daphne fixed her assistant with a threatening glare and walked out on stage. She forced herself not to look at the table where Adam was sitting.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," she said. "I hope you enjoyed the show. I know we enjoyed putting it on for you." She paused, smiling warmly as the applause began again, and now her eyes were irresistibly drawn to Adam's table.

His golden head was tilted slightly as he gazed up at her and there was the hint of a question in his pose. Then he raised his glass and smiled. It was that sweet, slow, utterly charming smile that she remembered far too well for her own good.

Daphne felt her knees turn to mush and it was all she could do to finish her little speech and get off the stage.

IT WAS CHAOS backstage, technicians dodging models who scurried about in

various stages of undress as they struggled to get into the gowns they would wear for that evening's charity dance in one of the hotel ballrooms.

"Hey, Daphne." Elaine hurried over. "Suzie just told me the most *amazing* thing."

"I'll just bet she did," Daphne said dryly as she continued to match the dresses against the list on her clipboard.

"Well," Elaine prodded. "Is that gorgeous blond hunk really your ex-husband?"

"Modesty forbids me to comment on the 'gorgeous' part," said a voice from behind them. "But I *am* her ex-husband."

Daphne turned to face him. "Hello, Adam."

"Hello, Daffy," he said, calling her by the nickname no one else had ever dared use. "It's been a long time."

"Yes," she agreed. And yet, Daphne felt as if it hadn't been any time at all. He was having the same effect on her that he'd always had.

They stood there, silently staring at each other, seemingly oblivious to the models and stagehands swarming around them, even to Elaine, standing wide-eyed by Daphne's elbow.

"So," he said softly, reaching out to gently grasp her shoulders. "Let me look at you." He held her away from him as his eyes ran over her. "You cut your hair."

Whatever she had expected him to say, it hadn't been that.

"Yes," she said again, and before she stopped to think, she reached up and touched the thick lock of blond hair that fell over his forehead. "So did you," she said, smoothing it back with an almost wifely gesture.

She didn't seem to hear his swift intake of breath as wonderingly, she touched the tiny crow's-feet at the

corner of his left eye. Her fingers whispered over one of the twin creases that ran from nose to mouth in either lean cheek. His lips had lost that youthful look of vulnerability and sweet sensuality. He had the mouth of a virile, passionate man now; he looked experienced and knowing.

An infinitely more interesting face, Daphne thought again, marveling at the healthy, golden glow of his skin. He looked as much like a Greek god as he ever had, all big and golden and glowing with health.

Suddenly, Daphne became aware of what she was doing. Her hand dropped abruptly to her side. "I'm forgetting my manners," she said, drawing her composure around her like a shawl. "Adam, this is my assistant, Elaine Prescott." She turned. "Elaine, this 'gorgeous hunk'—" her eyebrows arched slightly when Elaine blushed—"is Dr. Adam Forrest."

"Dr. Forrest," Elaine bobbed her head in greeting.

"Call me Adam, please." He smiled at her, and her blush deepened as he released her hand. "Will we see you at the charity dance tonight?"

"Not if she doesn't get busy now, you won't." Daphne broke into the conversation. "I want these dresses covered before we leave," she continued. "And all the jewelry collected and put into the hotel safe. Elaine?" She waved her hand in front of her assistant's face. "Earth to Elaine. Come in, please."

Elaine's eyes refocused. "What? Oh, the dresses. Sure. I'll do it right now." She smiled up at Adam and her usual brand of brashness seemed to return. "Save me a dance, okay, gorgeous?" she quipped, bouncing away.

Adam laughed. "Is she always like that?"

"Oh, no." Daphne's expression was deadpan. "She's just shy because she doesn't know you yet. Wait until she gets warmed up."

"No thanks. I think I'll pass." He sighed. "A kid like that makes me feel about a hundred years old."

"Well, you *have* gotten older," Daphne agreed. "But experience looks good on you."

"On you, too." He smiled and his bright blue eyes ran over her again. "You're even more beautiful than I remembered."

A faint smile curved Daphne's lips. Compliments from the closemouthed Adam, she thought. He had never called her beautiful before, except in bed. Words had always been hard for him.

"Why, Adam," she said lightly. "I didn't know you noticed such things."

He grinned in acknowledgment of her gentle barb. "Are you coming to this charity dance?" he said then.

"I haven't decided yet." Daphne's husky voice was casual, belying the sudden quivering of her stomach.

"What's to decide?" Adam smiled that sleepy, inviting smile of his. "We could have a dance for old times' sake. It'll be fun."

"Well..." Daphne hesitated. It would be more than just fun, it would be... what? Exciting? Thrilling?

Try dangerous, she thought, dangerous and foolish. He still had the power to stir her deepest emotions. Still, she thought, why not? What could it hurt? She wasn't married anymore... but was he?

Her eyes flickered to his left hand. There was no ring but that didn't mean anything.

"Won't your wife object to all these free dances you're passing out?" she said, before she could stop herself.

Adam's eyes captured hers. "I'm not married." There was a brief pause as he tried to read her expression. "Are you?"

Daphne shook her head slowly. "Not anymore." She glanced downward. "I was, but Miles—my husband died three years ago."

"I should say I'm sorry, shouldn't I?" Adam reached out and lifted her chin. Daphne felt his touch sizzle down to her toes. "But I'd be lying."

"Lying?" Daphne echoed.

"I make it a rule never to make love to married women," he explained softly. "And I've suddenly discovered that I want, very much, to make love to you."

"Oh." The single word came out as a whisper. This new, older Adam was certainly full of surprises, she thought. The Adam she once knew would never have said anything like that, especially in a room full of people.

"Well?" he said, his gentle smile mocking both of them. "Am I going to make love to you? With you?" His voice was a husky whisper.

Where had he learned all this, she wondered. His new technique was devastating. "But I thought..." She made a vague gesture. "The charity dance, aren't you supposed to be there? Don't you have a date or—something?"

Adam shook his head. "I came with a large group of people," he told her. "The fashion show was a duty appearance." He grinned. "Actually, Sunny threatened to picket my office if I didn't come. Now, any more excuses?"

"I have to supervise things here. No, really," she added. "There's a fortune in jewelry that has to go in the hotel safe." She paused. "Insurance won't cover it if I keep it in my room."

"You're staying at the hotel?" The words seemed to rasp out of his throat.

"Yes," she said, low. "I always stay here when I'm in town, which is every few months of so. More often, lately." She knew she was babbling, but she couldn't seem to stop. "Business is getting so good, I've been seriously thinking of opening up a West Coast office. It would—"

"Daffy." His fingers pressed her shoulder, silencing her. "When I said I wanted to make love to you, I didn't mean that I was going to throw you down and ravish you the minute we're alone, you know."

Her eyes grew wide. "You didn't?" she said softly.

Adam uttered a strangled sound. "No, I didn't." His free hand came up to grasp her other shoulder gently. "Although I'd like to, I also like to think I've developed more finesse than that. Besides, I'm not so thickheaded that I can't see the idea scares you."

"Oh, no. It—" Daphne began and then stopped, lowering her head to hide the light blush that touched her cheeks.

"All right, it doesn't exactly scare you," he amended. "But it makes you a little nervous, right?"

Daphne nodded.

"Well, it makes me a little nervous, too. Hell, it makes me a lot nervous! It's been quite a shock seeing you again like this without—" he paused—"without any warning. I had no idea that tonight's fashion guru and my ex-wife were one and the same. And I certainly didn't expect—" His hands dropped from her shoulders. He shoved them into his pockets and half turned away from her. "I didn't realize that you'd have such a strong effect on me." He looked up at her then, a sheepish, almost embarrassed expression on his face. "But I'm as hot

for you right now as I was when you ran over me with your bicycle," he admitted, his eyes blazing into hers. He was blushing under his tan.

"Adam!" she said softly. She didn't know what else to say. It was how she felt, too, but she'd had the advantage of *knowing* that's the way she would feel if she ever saw him again.

"Daphne!" He mimicked her shocked tone as he stared back at her. Then he shrugged and his chest lifted in a deep sigh. "Maybe we should just forget that...dance," he said. "It's probably better to let sleeping dogs lie."

"I was sort of looking forward to it," Daphne murmured.

Adam paused. "So was I," he said softly, "but—all right," he said like a man casting caution and good sense to the wind. "We'll have that dance. And then maybe we'll go somewhere quiet for a drink. Talk about old times and catch up with each other's lives. How does that sound to you?"

Daphne nodded her approval. "Sounds fine."

"All right, then. Why don't you do whatever it is you have to do and I'll meet you in the main lobby in, say—" he glanced at his watch "—thirty minutes?" Adam hesitated for the barest instant, indecision on his face, and then he cupped Daphne's cheek in his palm and bent his head, touching his lips lightly to hers.

Taken by surprise, Daphne responded as naturally as if there hadn't been eleven years between this kiss and the last one they had shared. What Adam had intended as a brief, experimental meeting of lips turned into something more.

He took fire immediately, molding his palm to the base of her skull, playing his fingers through her pale

golden-brown hair, taking full possession of her willing mouth.

They stood like that for a few endless seconds, connected only by the heat of their clinging mouths and his hand at the back of her head. It was Adam who broke the kiss, tearing his mouth from hers with difficulty. He pulled back to look down into her face and his eyes had the heavy-lidded, sleepy expression that Daphne recognized as a sign of his desire. Her own eyes, she knew, had probably lightened to gold as they always did when she was aroused.

"Don't keep me waiting, Daffy," Adam said then.

*

DAPHNE STOOD in front of the bathroom mirror in her hotel room, lipstick pencil in hand.

I'm as hot for you right now as I was when you ran over me with your bicycle. Had Adam really said that? And had he meant it?

"Oh, God, I hope so," Daphne said out loud, surprising herself with the fervent sound of her voice. Then "Fool," she said to her reflection. "You're an idiot to even *think* of going to bed with him. The man divorced you, remember?"

She closed her eyes as the memories assailed her. The last—the final—time Adam had kissed her, had loved her, was the night before she was to leave for New York. His lovemaking had been tinged with a barely controlled anger because he didn't want her to go.

"You can design clothes right here in San Francisco," he'd argued. "You are designing clothes here. Why do you have to run off to New York?"

She'd tried to explain it to him; a big-name department store had expressed an interest in her designs and

she was flying back East to pursue the matter. She'd only be gone for a month or two. Why couldn't he understand? Her career was as important to her as his was to him.

The argument had come to an abrupt halt when he had become impatient, and thus inarticulate. With a strangled oath, he had grabbed her, kissing her into silence, covering her body with his as they sank to the floor of their tiny studio apartment.

Their arguments always ended that way: In bed, with Daphne whimpering and writhing beneath the heated thrust of his golden body, willing to forget her side of the argument and give in. But this time it was too important to her and the next morning she had been on that plane for New York. Her ticket, paid for by the department store, was round-trip with an open return. She had never used it because, one month later, Adam had filed for divorce, charging her with desertion.

And now he has the gall to think I'm going to fall into bed with him, as if nothing had happened!

"If you had any sense at all," she said to her reflection, "you'd lock yourself in this room and forget you ever saw him tonight."

Obviously, though, she didn't have any sense. With another resigned sigh, Daphne scooped up a tiny gold mesh bag as she passed the bed and left the room.

Adam stood by one of the rounded Doric columns near the hotel's impressive front desk. The set of his shoulders was rigid. She had seen him stand exactly that way more times than she could remember, waiting for her. Punctuality had not been one of her virtues in the old days.

"Adam?" Daphne touched his shoulder.

He whirled around. "Daphne," he began. "You're on time," he said disbelievably.

"Well, don't look so amazed," Daphne's husky voice teased.

As if by mutual consent, they paused just short of the entrance to the ballroom. The dance floor was full to overflowing, music and laughter spilling across the threshold as smiling couples dipped and swayed to the Big Band sound of the orchestra. It was a gay, inviting scene but neither of them made a move to join in.

"Yoo-hoo, Adam! Oh, A-a-a-dam," Sunny McCorkle called out as she danced past in the arms of her husband. One hand fluttered in the direction of the tables. "We're sitting over—" She broke off when she caught sight of Daphne, then her face split with a self-satisfied grin. "Come join us after this dance," she said, giving them a thumbs-up sign.

"I'm beginning to smell a rat," Adam said softly.

"Only just beginning?" Daphne glanced up, eyes twinkling.

Adam considered that. "Didn't someone mention a quiet drink somewhere? Away from all this noise and confusion?"

"Yes, I think someone did." Together, they turned and silently, arm in arm, crossed the wide lobby and entered a dimly lit cocktail lounge on the other side.

Adam guided Daphne to one of the tiny tables in the farthest corner of the room, silently signaling to the waitress. "I'll have a Chivas on the rocks," he said when she hurried over to take their order. "Daphne?"

"I'll have a Brandy Alexander, please." She laid her mesh purse on the table. "This is nice," she said to Adam when the waitress had gone. "Cozy and quiet."

"Think we'll be safe here? From that lovely redheaded rat?" Adam grinned at her over the flickering candle flame. "She'll go crazy wondering where we've gone," he said. "You know, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw you walk out onto that stage." He fell silent as the waitress set down their drinks. "Biggest damn surprise of my life," he continued when she had left. He picked up his drink.

"Well, here's to old times." He paused for just a heartbeat, his glance catching Daphne's over the rim of the glass. "And to new ones," he added softly.

Daphne sucked in her breath. "To new ones," she said diffidently, feeling suddenly like a young girl on her very first date. She stared down into her glass for a moment, then, "So," she said, determined to break the silence. "Tell me what you've been doing for the past eleven years."

Adam eyed her for a brief moment, then shrugged. "Studying," he said. "Working."

"Be more specific," Daphne ordered.

"After my state boards, I did two years of rotating internship, three years of residency in general surgery, a year in orthopedics, and then, two more years residency in plastic surgery," he said, summarizing eight years of hard work into one sentence.

"All at the same hospital in L.A.?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

Daphne smiled sweetly. "A little rat told me. So...how long have you been back in San Francisco?"

"Almost six months now." His voice sounded hoarse, and he paused to clear it. "A position opened up here on the staff of Children's, Brian McCorkle recommended me and—here I am, back in my old hometown."

"And loving it."

"Yes," he admitted. "There's no place quite like it."

"Hm," Daphne agreed.

"Why don't we talk about you now?" Adam suggested. "What does it take to become a successful fashion designer?"

"Work, work, and more work. In that order."

"Well, it has obviously paid off," he complimented her. "From what I saw tonight, it looks as if you've become a raging success—"

"Only fair to middlin'," Daphne interrupted.

"Just like you always said you would," he finished. "You didn't stay with that department store very long."

"No," she answered. "Those quilted jackets I was doing for Bloomie's were only a flash in the pan. In one season." She snapped her fingers. "Out the next."

"So what happened?"

"Oh, I got a job with a design house and...learned more there in one month than I had in the whole two years of fashion college. In less than a year I was doing a few designs on my own—under the house name, of course. I did that for almost three years. And then—then Miles and I decided to go into business for ourselves and, well, the rest is history."

Adam's smile disappeared. "Miles," he said. "He was your husband."

"Yes," she said softly. "Poor Miles." She sighed.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up." Adam's voice was tight. "It upsets you to talk about it."

"No, I—" she began. It didn't upset her in the way Adam meant. It was just that she had never really loved Miles, not in the way she had loved—still loved—Adam. The thought always made her feel a little guilty.

"No, it doesn't upset me to talk about him," she assured Adam. "It's been almost three years since the accident. He was driving up to a friend's place in Connecticut," she told him. "It was a Friday night, very late, and he was hit head-on by a drunk driver. The doctors assured me that he died almost instantly."

"Daphne, I'm sorry. Sorry, and terribly ashamed."

"Ashamed? Why?"

"For that crack I made backstage. I had no right dismissing another man's death so... so callously. Even if—*especially* if it would give me something I wanted."

She reached across the table, covering his hand with hers. "Please, Adam, don't. I know you didn't mean it."

He looked up at that, and his hand tightened on hers. She couldn't quite read the message in his eyes. Desire, of course. That had never been far from the surface between them. But there was something else there, too. Relief?

He stood, pulling her to her feet. "Why don't we go have that dance now? It's time."

Yes, Daphne thought. *More than time.*

As they reached the threshold of the ballroom the orchestra began a slow, sweet number, and without a pause Adam swung her onto the crowded dance floor. His right hand settled on the small of her back, pulling her close to his body. His left hand reached for hers and their fingers linked, palms touching. He brought her hand to his chest, turning her wrist slightly so that it was resting snugly against the black satin lapels of his jacket.

She moved more fully into Adam's embrace, settling into him without even thinking about it, the way they had always danced together. Her head

nestled beneath his chin, her left hand seeking the soft, short hairs at the nape of his neck. The movement caused the wide neckline of her dress to slide down, baring the opposite shoulder, but Daphne didn't notice. She buried more deeply into him.

Sighing, his eyes closed, Adam lowered his head to rest his cheek against her hair. The back of his hand pressed against the top of her breast as they swayed to the slow, soft music.

Daphne's eyes closed, too, and her heart began to beat a little faster. She had to make a conscious effort to keep her breathing even. She needn't have bothered. Adam's breath was just as uneven, his heart was beating just as fast.

"Daphne." The word was a caress. A question. "Daphne, look at me." His voice was low, intense with emotion.

Daphne gazed up at him. His eyes were blazing: a bright, burning, scorching blue. It was like looking into a raging inferno of long-suppressed desire. Daphne melted.

"Yes," she said, answering his unspoken question.

Adam stopped dancing, oblivious to the other couples. "When?"

"Now." Daphne's eyes closed again. "Please."

Adam touched his mouth to the exposed curve of her shoulder. Then he led her from the ballroom.

They were still holding hands when they stepped off the elevator on Daphne's floor. Their palms were pressed tightly together, fingers intertwined like two frightened, lovesick teenagers who have finally, irrevocably decided to do something about their feelings for each other.

Only I wasn't this scared the first time, Daphne thought, taking two steps to every one of Adam's as they

hurried down the corridor. *I wasn't this excited. And, oh God, I wasn't nearly this hungry!*

Daphne's room was in shadows, illuminated only by a narrow wedge of light from the bathroom. Before Daphne could even find the light switch, Adam hauled her into his arms.

"Oh, Daphne," she heard him say, just before his mouth found hers in the darkness, claiming it with a savage hunger. She stretched on tiptoe, her mouth answering his, her arms clinging to him.

The thrust of his tongue was almost manic, seeking, searching, as their mouths twisted and turned upon each other. His hands roamed her back while he kissed her, kneading the curves of her spine and shoulders, sizzling over apricot silk as he sought a way to the warm soft skin beneath the dress.

Daphne, too, began seeking bare flesh. Her hands dropped to his neck, whispering over the skin of his nape, and slid under the collar of his evening jacket. With her mouth still sealed tightly to his, she managed to ease the jacket off his shoulders. It dropped, unheeded, to the carpeted floor.

Her arms circled his waist then, as his went back around her, and her hands tugged impatiently at the fabric of his shirt until it came free of his slacks. With a muffled cry, she pressed her palms flat against the smooth bare skin of his lower back, pulling him even more tightly to her.

Obligingly, Adam arched, thrusting his hips forward as he sought the soft cradle of her thighs. But their heights were too disparate for either of them to feel the pressure where they most wanted it. Adam bent his knee, insinuating it between her parted thighs, and slid his hands down to cup her

buttocks, lifting her into his aroused body.

Daphne whimpered softly, deep in her throat, and began to move against him. Her hands flexed rhythmically against the bare flesh of his back, her thighs tight against the welcome intrusion of his.

Adam's tongue thrust deeper into her open mouth, blatantly imitating the more subtle movements of his hips. His hands feathered over her pliant body, frantic now as he looked for a way to get her out of the dress without letting her go. He managed to loosen the belt enough so that it slid to the floor, but that was as far as he could go.

In answer, Daphne withdrew her hands and, in two quick movements, unfastened the small crystal buttons at either wrist. Then, crossing her arms in front of her body, she grasped the elastic waistline, pulled the dress up over her head and dropped four hundred dollars worth of pure silk inside out on the carpet.

"There," she said matter-of-factly. "It's off." She stood before him wearing only a pair of expensive high-heeled shoes, very sheer French panty hose and a strapless bra the color of heavily creamed coffee. Her breasts rose softly above the satin bra, and Adam reached for her again.

But Daphne stepped back, then grasped the end of his bow tie with trembling fingers and tugged it loose. She drew it out from under his collar, tossing it to the floor with one hand, reaching for the topmost button on his shirt with the other.

Adam put his hands on her waist then, over the lace band of her panty hose, as if to steady her. His long hard fingers curved around to the small of her back. His thumbs rested against her hipbones, rotating slowly.

Daphne gasped softly but continued with her task. At last it was done and she slipped her hands under the shirt.

So soft, she thought. So warm. So exactly as her hands remembered him!

She straightened her fingers, threading them up through the tangle of silky hair on his chest and then down again, until she could feel one hard male nipple against the center of each sensitive palm. She sighed deeply, savoring the feel of the man she had thought she would never touch again.

Adam's hands slid up her back and deftly released the clasp of her bra. She lifted her arms from her sides, letting the bra fall away from her body. Her breasts were full and firm and aching, the nipples pale brown and hard as little pebbles; puckered tightly with desire. She moved forward until her breasts were touching his chest, until the little golden whorls of hair were tickling her sensitive skin.

Adam crushed her to him, his mouth taking hers in a quick hard kiss that seemed designed to brand her lips with his passion. Then he lifted and carried her across to the bed.

Daphne's shoes hit the carpet with soft little thumps. Then Adam laid her gently on the turned-down bed and straightened up to remove the rest of his clothes.

Daphne half sat up, intending to shimmy out of her panty hose, but Adam bent over her, gloriously naked now, and pressed her back into the pale green sheets. Hooking trembling hands in the waistband of her one remaining garment, he drew them past her hips and down her legs. Standing there beside the bed, her panty hose dangling inside out from one hand, he gazed down at her.

His eyes made a visual feast of her ankles and calves and smooth creamy

thighs, leaving ripples of sensation fluttering across the softly rounded belly, and the full, taut breasts that rose and fell with each quick breath.

Daphne, lying so still under his heated gaze, was making a survey of her own, taking inventory, remembering...

His legs and arms were still corded with the long, lean muscles of a regular runner, still dusted with that sprinkling of soft blond hair. His shoulders were still those of a football player, his chest still deep and broad. Avidly, her eyes starved for the sight of him, she followed the narrowing arrow of chest hair down the flat-muscled wall of his stomach to where it widened again. He was full and hard and straining eagerly toward her.

Her eyes skittered back to his face and found his eyes waiting. They stared at each other for a full thirty seconds without saying a word.

"You're so damn beautiful," he said finally.

"So are you." Daphne lifted her arms, opening her body to his. "Now," she whispered huskily. "Please."

He came to her in one swift movement, thrusting forward into her willing moistness. Her body arched as he entered her, both of them moaning in satisfaction as he buried himself deep inside her. He pressed his hips down and forward, trying to hold her still as he fought for the control that her eagerness had taken from him. But Daphne continued to move, her legs wrapping around his waist, her hips bucking rhythmically under his.

"Daphne." His voice was ragged, breathless. "Oh, baby, slow down. I..." His hands slid down her torso to hold her. "I'll be too fast for you if you don't slow down."

"No." She panted. "No, you won't...not this time..." She pressed her nails into the hard curve of his buttocks. "Oh, Adam, *please*," she urged.

Assured that he wasn't going to leave her wanting, Adam slipped his hands under her hips, fitting her body even more closely to his, and began to move. His hips pumped strongly against her. One minute...two, and then Daphne's body stiffened like an overstrung bow and she gave a low moan of ecstatic pleasure that was echoed a moment later by a deep cry from Adam.

It took several long minutes for their breathing to slow to near normal and several more before Adam reluctantly raised his head from the warm sweet space between her neck and shoulder. He stared down into her eyes and the look that passed between them was somehow hesitant, almost shy.

Well, Daphne thought, what do you say to an ex-husband when you find yourself in bed with him after a separation of eleven years?

Before she could come up with a suitable answer, Adam lifted himself from her body and rolled over onto his back. He lay beside her, silent and still, not touching, as if waiting for her to speak first.

Daphne turned her head and found him staring at her in the darkness. His eyes seemed to reflect every bit of the confusion she felt, but in the dim light, she couldn't be sure.

"Daphne, I—" he began.

His words were cut off by a series of sharp staccato beeps. They both jumped as if a whip had been cracked over their nude bodies and then Adam jackknifed to his feet. "Damn beeper!" He scooped his tuxedo up off the floor, found the small rectangular metal box and shut it off.

"I'm sorry." He gestured at the beeper in his hand, his expression registering something that looked suspiciously like relief. Daphne recognized it because she felt it, too.

"Probably the hospital," he said then, sitting on the edge of the rumpled bed with his back to her. He switched on the bedside lamp and reached for the phone. "I have to call my service," he mumbled. "Could be an emergency."

Daphne nodded and scurried under the covers, listening to his side of the phone conversation.

"Umm-hmm. When?" he said into the phone. His voice was cool, professional. "How long has she been complaining of pain?" He found his white jockey shorts and, phone wedged between his ear and shoulder, used both hands to pull them on. "Umm-hmm. No, I realize she can be difficult to deal with, and I left instructions to call me if— No, you didn't interrupt anything important. Fifteen minutes." He dropped the receiver into the cradle. Now he was zipping up his slacks.

"That was one of the hospitals," he said unnecessarily. "One of my patients seems to be experiencing some unusual pain after an abdominal tuck. I don't want to take any chances." He sat down again to put on his shoes and socks. "I hope you understand."

"Yes, of course," she said, understanding only that he couldn't get out of the room fast enough.

Dressed now, Adam leaned across the width of the bed and touched Daphne's shoulder. "I'm sorry about this, Daffy. About leaving you like this right after..." He hesitated, not knowing what to say.

Daphne stopped him. "It's okay," she said. "I really do understand. Duty calls."

"Maybe we could get together for lunch tomorrow," he suggested. Rather halfheartedly, Daphne thought.

She didn't want any part of any "mercy lunches." *You didn't interrupt anything important.* "I don't think so," she stated.

"But—"

"No, really, I can't." She forced herself to smile. "I have to catch an early plane home tomorrow." She slid from the bed, wrapping the bedspread around her as she rose. She pulled open the door, shielding her half-clad body behind it. "Well, it's been lovely seeing you again, Adam," she went on. "We must do it again sometime."

Adam hesitated for a moment, then tossing his tuxedo jacket over his shoulder, he strolled toward Daphne. He stopped at the open door and lifted her chin with his free hand. Daphne clutched the bedspread tighter.

"Give me a call next time you're in town and we will," he suggested, dropping a quick, careless kiss on her astonished mouth before he left.

*

"MRS. GRANGER, you have a call on line one," Elaine's assistant shouted across the busy workroom.

Daphne's head snapped up at the words, a half panicked, half inquiring look skittering over her face.

"It's Mrs. McCorkle," the girl added, as Elaine picked up a couple of Daphne's sketches to study them.

The panic receded instantly. "Sunny, you traitor!" Daphne said without preamble. "I ought to strangle you! If you were here right now I *would!*"

"It's nice to hear from you, too," Sunny said cheerfully.

"The lowest, sneakiest trick you've ever pulled," Daphne accused. "You

knew Adam was at Children's Hospital. You *knew* he was going to be at that charity benefit. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, is *that* what this is all about?" Sunny's voice was innocence itself. "If I'd had any idea that just *seeing* him again was going to upset you this much I would have said something."

"I am not upset."

"Whatever," Sunny agreed absently. "So, listen—the reason I called is to invite you to a party next week. Now before you say no, Daphne," she hurried on, "remember that you did tell me you'd be back in town then. That meeting at I. Magnin. And as long as you're going to be here anyway, why not come to our party? It'll be a real hoot! All the old gang's coming."

"Adam, too, I suppose?" Daphne interrupted.

"Well, of course! It's his party."

"I thought it was your party."

"Well, I'm *giving* it," Sunny said patiently. "But it's *for* Adam. His thirty-seventh birthday, remember? It's sort of a welcome home, too, to San Francisco. Brian thought—"

"And you expect me to come?" Daphne could hardly believe her ears.

"Well, yes. That's exactly what I expect." Sunny paused. "Oh, come on, Daphne. I know you're terribly busy and everything, and this trip to San Francisco is business, but it would be so much fun if you could make it. Say you'll at least *try* to stop by?"

Daphne, realizing that she had been manipulated by a master, said she'd try. "But don't count on it," she warned.

"Terrific!" Sunny squealed. "See you on the twenty-eighth. And wear

something drop-dead sexy," she ordered, hanging up before Daphne could remind her that she'd only said she'd try to make it.

That *Sunny*, she thought. Well, she had no intention of going to Adam's birthday party. Why ask for trouble? That night with Adam had been a mistake. But with him right there in the flesh, she hadn't really cared.

Well, now she cared. Because now it hurt. And now she missed him as deeply as she had eleven years ago. For the past week, she had been weaving crazy, impossible dreams.

No, she told herself. No, *I'm not going to that party.*

"I think you should go." Elaine's words made Daphne start with surprise.

She looked over her shoulder, realizing that Elaine was only responding to the conversation she had overheard and not answering Daphne's unspoken comment. "Oh, you do, do you?" she said.

"Yes, I do," Elaine stated. "And if you promise not to bite my head off, I'll tell you why."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to like this," Daphne said. "But go ahead." She cocked her head, forearm resting against the edge of the drawing board. "Why should I go?"

"Because..." Elaine paused then rushed ahead. "Because, ever since he kissed you," she said, "you've been moping around like some lovesick teenager, that's why. You practically jump out of your skin every time the phone rings. You're irritable and cranky. You snap at people for no reason."

"I know I haven't been a joy to be around lately," she admitted. "But I

don't know how you think my going to Adam's little party is going to change things. The way I see it, it will only make it worse."

"No. Just think about it a minute," Elaine urged. "If you stay away from him you'll think about him all the more. But if you go out to California, see him again, even have an affair, maybe... Well—it'll give you a chance to get him out of your system. See? And you'll probably realize that your relationship wasn't as good as you remembered."

"My God, Elaine," Daphne said. "How do you know so much?"

"Well, Suzie told me what you'd told her," she admitted.

"No, I didn't mean that," Daphne murmured. "I meant how did you know..." She shook her head as if to clear it, then smiled. "Do you think you could stand taking care of my cats for a couple of days?" she asked.

"You're going, then?"

"Yes," Daphne said decisively. "Yes, I'm going."

DAPHNE'S RESOLVE wasn't quite so firm as she sat in her rented LeBaron, trying to work up the nerve to go in.

It looked like a fairly big party, she thought, eyeing the cars that lined both sides of the steep street for half a block in either direction. *Oh, come on*, she scolded herself. *There's nothing to be afraid of. Be brave*, she told herself, her fingers fussing with the red satin ribbon on Adam's birthday gift.

After much thought, she had decided on a one-pound box of gourmet chocolate chunk cookies; soft and chewy and rich with Hawaiian macadamia nuts. They were homey without being homemade, extravagant with-

out being expensive, friendly without being intimate. And they said absolutely nothing about how she felt.

After all, *she* might have come to San Francisco with the idea of starting up an affair with her ex-husband as a way to get him out of her system for good, but there was no telling what he might have in mind.

Daphne finally got out of the car and, mindful of the height of her heels, carefully made her way up the steep incline of the street and the even steeper angle of the stairs, to the front door. Taking one last deep breath, she rang the doorbell.

"I'll get it!" A high-pitched, childish voice rang out.

"I'll get it," another, older voice said. The door was yanked open. "You go back upstairs before I blister your rear," Sunny threatened cheerfully, shooing the oldest of her three children back up the wide stairs.

"Daphne!" she cried, swooping to enfold her in a Giorgio-scented hug. "You look great! Elegant as all get-out, dammit!" she exclaimed, taking in Daphne's loosely belted ivory silk big shirt and shiny, formfitting brown leather pants.

"I'm so glad you came," she said. "I knew you would." She turned her head, speaking over the noise of the stereo. "Brian, come look who's here. It's Daphne."

He ambled over to greet her.

"Daphne, honey," he said warmly, as he leaned down to kiss her. "It's good to see you again. Where've you been keeping yourself?"

Daphne returned his kiss warmly. "New York, mostly." She answered him literally, her eyes darting past his shoulder to the crowded room be-

yond. Adam wasn't anywhere to be seen. "Dallas and L.A. during the markets. And San Francisco every month or so." She grinned up at him. "You're just never around when I drop by."

"That's because nobody ever tells me when you're dropping by," he grumbled good-naturedly.

Sunny ignored his teasing. "I'm going to take Daphne into the living room and reintroduce her to everyone," she stated.

Daphne wandered from group to group after that, reacquainting herself with the friends of her carefree, radical youth. The music throbbing from the stereo was from that era, too, an eclectic mix of the Rolling Stones, Steppenwolf, the Beatles, the Beach Boys, Dylan, the Righteous Brothers, Peter, Paul and Mary.

"Oh, and do you remember that 'Save the Otters' march? The one Carl arranged. It rained all over us, remember?"

"...that time Sunny chained herself to the door of the student union building and then lost the keys to the handcuffs and the janitor had to saw them off her."

"...Daphne was marching down Market Street in the feminists' Sunrise Protest. Remember how she hit that cameraman with her sign and ended up on the six o'clock news?"

Laughter, including Daphne's own, filled the air.

"Adam got so mad I thought he'd bust a gut," another voice said.

Yes, *Adam*, Daphne thought. Where was he?

"I called the hospital a few minutes ago," Brian told them. "They said he was still in surgery—"

There was a unanimous groan.

"So we're going to go ahead and eat without him—"

Good-natured cheers filled the air.

"No one had better lay a finger on that cake, though," Sunny warned. "We're not cutting it until Adam gets here."

Everyone trooped toward the laden dining room table, filling their plates with triangles of shrimp toast, steamed pearl balls, finger-sized egg rolls, five spice chicken, sweet and sour pork and fluffy boiled rice. Chinese food used to be Adam's absolute favorite, Daphne remembered, reaching for a plate. Apparently, it still was.

"IF EVERYBODY'S finished eating, let's push back the furniture and dance." Sunny picked up her plate with one hand and reached across for Daphne's with the other. "I'll just take a few of these things out to the kitchen first. You all start moving the furniture."

Daphne rose as some of the others began to do as Sunny had suggested, and approached a young woman who had earlier been defending the practice of vivisection. "I know this sounds like a line from an old movie," she began, smiling, "but don't I know you?"

"You used to," the younger woman said. She paused, a cool unfriendly smile on her lips. "I'm Marcia Forrest."

"Oh, my God, of course! Marcia. No wonder you looked so familiar." *And are so unfriendly*, Daphne thought. Adam's baby sister had never liked Adam's wife. "The last time I saw you, you were what? Twelve? Thirteen?"

"Thirteen," Marcia acknowledged.

"So, what are you up to these days?"

"I'm in my second year of medical school at UC San Francisco. I intend to specialize in cardiovascular surgery. Surgery on the heart," she added, as if Daphne might not know what it was.

"How...admirable. Adam must be very proud of you," Daphne said sincerely.

"Yes, I believe he is," Marcia said.

"Well, it was nice talking to you again but I—think I'll just go see if Sunny needs any help." She hurried off to the kitchen.

"Marcia Forrest certainly has a charming bedside manner, doesn't she?" Daphne said a few minutes later, as she helped Sunny load the dishwasher.

"The original Miss Iceberg," the redhead agreed dryly.

"And Gracie and Art? How are they?" Daphne asked, referring to Adam's parents. "As I remember, they weren't all that crazy about me, either." Her eyebrows quirked upward. "I'm sure they thought I was going to lead their future doctor away from the straight and narrow."

"They're fine, too, as far as I know," Sunny told her. "Still living in the old neighborhood, even though Adam was all prepared to buy them a big new house. But they did accept a trip to Hawaii last summer. As an anniversary present."

"That must have made Adam happy."

"Tickled him pink," Sunny agreed, turning on the dishwasher. She leaned back against the kitchen counter.

"Do you know," she said, "this is the first time I've ever heard you will-

ingly mention Adam's name since the divorce."

"Is it?"

"Yes," Sunny said softly. "Why is that, I wonder?"

"Because," Daphne replied firmly, "this will be the first time I've seen him since the divorce. Well, not counting the, uh, charity thing. Since he's... back in the Bay Area now I'll probably run into him once in a while. Here, anyway and... it's only sensible to try to be civil."

"Hmm" was all Sunny would say. Then she cocked her head slightly, listening. "Well, you'd better prepare to be civil. I think I hear Adam's voice."

Daphne followed her friend out of the kitchen, hanging back as Sunny hurried up to greet her latest guest, watching as Adam kissed Sunny's proffered cheek.

He laughed at something she said, his eyes crinkling up at the corners, and extended his hand toward Brian. Then he moved away from the door to greet Marcia with a brief, brotherly hug.

"I take it you knew about this little surprise," he said.

Marcia nodded. "Of course. How else do you think I could make sure that Ginny would get you here?"

"So, Ginny was in on this, too, hmm?" He glanced back over his shoulder. "Well, come here and take your medicine, woman." He circled the shoulders of a small, dark-haired woman. Laughing, she stood at his side. As he turned back to his sister, he caught sight of Daphne.

He went stock-still for a moment, his eyes on hers as the quick color came and went in his face, but Daphne wasn't looking at him. She was look-

ing, instead, at the woman who stood so securely in the circle of his arm. She was, Daphne thought despairingly, quite lovely.

Daphne felt all her plans go down the drain. It just hadn't occurred to her that Adam—*her* Adam—might have another woman. Not after the night in her hotel room.

Her eyes lifted to his face then, a half-accusing expression in their golden-brown depths. *Well, don't worry, she telegraphed silently, her pride stung. I want to keep that night a secret, too.*

What happened next was that Daphne smiled, a lovely, utterly false smile, and crossed the room to him. "Happy birthday, Adam," she said evenly, extending her right hand as she spoke.

He took her hand. "Thank you," he answered, his voice just as even.

And then their hands dropped back to their sides and they stood there like two people who had never been more than casual friends.

"Aren't you going to introduce Ginny to Daphne?" Marcia prompted.

"What?" He shook his head slightly as if coming out of a trance and met his sister's eyes. "Oh, sure. Sure."

The two women nodded at each other, exchanging cool smiles, neither sure of the status of the other in Adam's life.

Marcia was quick to fill in the gaps. "Ginny is a nurse. The best OR nurse he's ever worked with, Adam says."

"Yes." He gave Ginny's shoulders a halfhearted little squeeze and dropped his arm. "The best," he added.

"They've been a team practically since the day Adam started at Children's. And—"

"Marcia, please," Ginny interrupted. "You're making me blush."

"Sorry," Marcia said, but she didn't look sorry.

"Well, it's been lovely to meet you, Ginny," Daphne said then. "But, if you'll excuse me, I have to find Sunny and say my goodbyes."

"You're not leaving already?" Marcia's tone was victorious.

"'Fraid so. I've got an early meeting at I. Magnin tomorrow," she lied. "And, unfortunately, I need to go over my presentation one more time."

Sunny came hurrying up to stop her. "You're not leaving already?" she said, meaning it. She glanced up at Adam. "Not when the guest of honor just got here."

"'Fraid so," she said again. "I really have to be going."

The two women exchanged a quick, warm hug. "Drive carefully," Sunny admonished.

"I will." She raised her eyes to Adam's one last time. "Happy birthday," she said and hurried out.

DAPHNE WAS wide awake when the first pale fingers of sunlight started to pry their way into her hotel room. She lay on her back on the double bed and stared up at the ceiling, eyes dry now, thinking about the night before.

She was *glad*, she told herself fiercely, that Adam had come to Sunny's party with another woman. It had kept her from making a complete fool of herself.

Elaine had suggested that she be upfront. "Just say 'Listen, Adam, I en-

joyed the other night, let's do it again soon.' He'll take it from there."

But Daphne couldn't have said anything like that in a million years. What she'd had in mind was more subtle. Invite him out for a birthday drink, maybe, and then let nature take its course. Yet, both alternatives sounded so calculating and Daphne was a woman who had always expressed her emotions more spontaneously. Well, it was a moot point now. Blinking back tears she sat up and reached for the telephone. She would leave San Francisco on the first available flight. Elaine could fly out and handle her accounts.

The phone rang just as Daphne put her hand on it.

"Hello?" she said, after three rings.

"Daffy? It's Adam. Did I wake you?"

"No. No, you didn't wake me," she said, startled to hear from him after spending all night thinking about the man. It was almost as if she had conjured him up.

"Well, I thought... we didn't get much of a chance to visit last night. And I thought you might have time for breakfast before your business meeting."

"Meeting?" Daphne said, forgetting that had been her excuse to leave the party. Comprehension dawned. "Oh, the meeting at I. Magnin. Yes, well, it's not for several hours yet." Actually, it wasn't until Monday. "But I—"

"Then you're free for breakfast," Adam said eagerly. "You stay where you are. I'll be right up."

"Up?" she squeaked. "You mean you're in the hotel?"

"At a house phone in the lobby."

"Fine, then you stay—" she began, intending to say that she'd come down. But he had hung up on the word "fine."

Oh, my God, she thought. She wasn't dressed, hadn't combed her hair, and her eyes were all red from crying half the night.

She snatched her velour robe off the floor by the bed and stepped into it, then hurried toward the bathroom. *Lord, what a mess*, she thought, peering at herself in the mirror. She brushed her teeth first and then scooped handfuls of cold water over her face.

Better, she decided, *but not good enough*.

There was a sharp rap on the door.

Daphne started, smearing lip gloss all across one cheek. "Just a minute," she called, and yanked a tissue from the dispenser.

There was another rap on the door.

"Damn." She threw the lip brush down in exasperation, seeing how little improvement it made. Waving a dismissive hand at her image, she left the bathroom.

Another rap, louder and more impatient.

"I'm coming!" *Impatient as ever*, she thought, as she opened the door.

"Adam," she began brightly and then stopped.

He was dressed the way she had always liked best, casually, in faded jeans, a dark periwinkle-blue turtle-neck that intensified the color of his eyes and enhanced the golden glow of his skin, and a Sam Spade trench coat with the collar turned up. Standing there with a paper sack in one hand, he quite literally took her breath away.

Oh, Adam!

"May I come in?"

"Please do." Daphne inclined her head and stepped back to allow him entrance.

He set the paper sack down on the small round table at the window and opened it, releasing the fragrant aroma of coffee. "Do you still like raspberry Danish?"

"You've got raspberry Danish in there, too?"

"Sure." He held a cup of coffee toward her. "Coffee's no good without something to dunk in it." He pried the lid off a second cup. "Here. A raspberry Danish for you." He handed it to her. "A cinnamon roll for me and—" he pulled out two more plastic cups "—orange juice for both of us. Well, come on, sit down."

Adam shrugged out of his trench coat, draping it across the back of the chair, and sat down, too, pretending interest in his cinnamon roll. "About the other night," he said.

"Last night?" She frowned.

"No. The night of Sunny's charity thing."

"Oh. *That* other night." Daphne forced herself to hold his eyes. "What about it?"

"I wanted to apologize."

Daphne sipped her coffee. "For what?" she asked.

"For leaving so abruptly like that. I didn't... I mean, it wasn't—polite," he said finally.

Not polite, she thought, wondering if that's all that was bothering him; a breach in the etiquette of brief sexual encounters. "Well, don't worry about it," she said lightly. "You had an emergency, so you're excused." She gave him a false, brittle smile. "Feel better now?"

"No." The words were intense. "I didn't want to leave you that night." He put his hand on her arm. "I wanted to stay and make love to you again. Slowly, all night long. In every way possible." Daphne began to feel faint. "I still want to," he said quietly.

Daphne eased her arm out from under his hand. "You didn't call," she accused, surprising herself. It was the last thing she had intended to say.

Adam let her pull away. "I wanted to." He ran his hand through his hair. "But I thought it would be better—for both of us—if I didn't. We've got separate lives now," he went on, half to himself. "Successful lives," he emphasized, "on separate coasts. And it's been eleven years." He looked up, his eyes faintly accusing. "I actually thought I was over wanting you," he amended. "But you're like a..." He shook his head. "Like a drug to me, Daphne. All I have to do is see you again and I ache like a sixteen-year-old boy who hasn't had his first woman." He took a deep breath. "Why the *hell* did you have to come back here?"

"Because I ache for you, too," she said simply.

She knew that it was probably unwise to admit how she felt. But it must have been hard for him to lay his feelings out in the open and so, she could be no less open about hers.

"You, too?" Adam's hand tentatively touched hers.

"Me, too." She lifted her hand, palm toward him, and let him lace his fingers with hers. "After that night I couldn't get you out of my mind. Couldn't forget how good it had been." His fingers tightened. She squeezed back. "I told myself it would be best if we didn't see each other

again. But then Sunny called and invited me to your birthday party and I thought 'Why not?' We're both adults now. We could be friends. Lots of exes are. Right?"

Adam nodded slowly, his expression wary.

Oh, hell! Who am I trying to kid, she thought.

She straightened and pulled her hand from his. "No, that's not true." She laced her fingers together on the table. "The truth is," she said, "that I decided to come to Sunny's party to start an affair with you."

"What?" Adam's blue eyes opened wide.

She met his eyes straight on. "I thought that would be the way to get you out of my system. I mean, this intense...*thing* we seem to have for each other would have to fizzle out sooner or later and—"

"It hasn't fizzled in eleven years."

"No, but I think that's because of the way it ended. We parted still wanting each other physically, even though the emotions were gone." *On your part, anyway,* she added silently. "And I thought, if we had an affair it might, uh, might—"

"Get me out of your system for good," he finished for her. His tone was tinged with hurt but Daphne didn't notice.

She nodded, forgetting that she had spent most of last night deciding that *nothing* would get Adam out of her system for good. "Yes." She smiled ruefully. "Do I sound crazy?"

"Maybe. But if you're crazy, then so am I."

"Huh?" Daphne lifted her brows inquiringly.

"I think we should have an affair," he elaborated.

"Oh."

They both fell silent, picking at their respective pastries.

Daphne spoke up after a minute. "Well," she said a bit breathlessly. "Should we start now?"

"What about your appointment at I. Magnin?" Adam asked.

She paused, considering. "There isn't one," she said. "Well, there *is*, but not until Monday."

"You mean you lied?"

"I didn't *lie*," Daphne said. "I just rearranged the facts a little."

"Why did you feel it necessary?"

"Because you came to Sunny's party with that—friend of yours."

"Ginny? What's Ginny got to do with it?"

"Because, when I realized that you and Ginny were a couple my little plan for... an affair suddenly didn't seem to be too smart. The 'other woman' is *not* a role I'm interested in playing. Even for you." *Oh, no! Had she really said that?* "Satisfied?"

"No." Adam took her chin in his hand. "Ginny and I are not a couple," he said, eyes blazing into hers. "If we were I wouldn't be here. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Adam," she replied meekly, something inside her flaming into sudden joy. *Ginny and I are not a couple!* Had he ever said seven more beautiful words to her?

"Good." His hand caressed her throat. "Now, if that's settled, can we get back to what we were doing?"

A slow grin spread over Daphne's face. "Breakfast?"

Adam shook his head, his lips set in an answering grin. "There's the little

matter of our affair. I thought we'd start with, say, a little heavy necking." He led her over to the bed. "A bit of serious petting, then—"

Daphne's stomach growled loudly. "Just ignore it," she advised, reaching up to pull his head down to hers.

Their lips touched.

Daphne's stomach growled again.

Adam sighed. "Come on, get up." He stood, pulling her to her feet. "I refuse to make love to a woman whose stomach is growling at me."

"But, Adam," Daphne began.

He stopped her words with a quick, hard kiss. "The next time I make love to you, Daffy," he said, "it's going to take a good long time. Not ten minutes like the other night. Hours," he promised gruffly. "I intend to savour every luscious inch of you and I don't want you fainting from hunger right in the middle of it. So..." He released her with a last quick kiss on the end of her nose. "You go get dressed and I'll take you out for a real breakfast. Okay?"

"Okay," she said reluctantly.

She showered quickly, then washed and styled her short hair in less than twenty minutes. Her makeup took almost no time. A dab of sheer ivory foundation, a dusting of peachy blusher, was all her complexion needed to make it glow.

She had never looked better in her life, she thought. That's what love did for a woman. It made her sparkle as if she were lit from inside by a thousand candles.

She had loved Adam since she was seventeen years old. And had continued loving him, in absentia so to speak, since she was twenty. What if he set her adrift again before she was ready? And he would, she told herself, staring

wide-eyed at the woman in the mirror. That had to be faced up front. Because Adam would eventually get her "out of his system" and she would be left alone again, still loving him.

"So what else is new?" she murmured. She had survived it then—and even gone on to make a success of her life—she would survive it when it happened again. As it surely would. But until then... she would enjoy every minute of every day with him and not think about the future. They were going to have a glorious affair. Simply glorious!

*

"UH-HUH. Yes, got it." Daphne sat in one of Adam's velveteen, padded dining room chairs, her bare feet propped on another one, rapidly making notes as she listened to the voice on the phone.

Adam's invitation to stay with him during her next trip to San Francisco had turned into almost six weeks of conducting her business on a trans-continental basis. She was getting very good at it.

"Yes, the sketches arrived in perfect condition. No problems. Umm-hmm. Well, maybe you'd better double-check that."

She pushed a huge marmalade cat off her notepad and then relented, idly scratching him behind the ears.

"And the shelter people were pleased with the fund raiser?" she said. "That's great, Elaine. You did a fine job," she congratulated her assistant warmly.

She paused for a moment, listening. "This coming Monday," she answered. "Flight 487... no, I'll take a taxi... plenty of time," she said air-

ily. "Mr. Chan isn't due until Wednesday. You can hold the fort for three more days, can't you?" She smiled to herself. "Yes, I thought so. Oh, and tell Hiram—" Hiram was her lawyer—"that I'm sending him a copy of a partnership agreement I'd like him to look over."

"A partnership agreement?" Elaine said carefully.

"Uh-huh." Daphne smiled at the gray Persian who sat on the opposite end of the table cleaning herself. "It's about time I gave you a piece of the action, don't you think?"

Elaine's voice rose. "You mean you're making me a partner?"

"Not a *full* partner," Daphne warned. "Just twenty percent to start and—"

"Twenty percent! Of Night Lights?"

Daphne chuckled. "What else have I got twenty percent of to give away? Anyway, you've earned it."

"Oh, Daphne, I don't know what to say. I—"

"Well, don't say anything," Daphne advised. "I haven't got time to listen to you. Sunny'll be here any minute and I've got to get some of this mess straightened up before I leave or Adam's housekeeper will have a fit." She hung up before Elaine could say another word.

"Go on, Queenie," she said, shooing the gray cat off the table. "You're in my way."

Quickly, she straightened the sketches and notepads spread out across Adam's dining room table, sorting them into haphazard piles according to size. She picked up a coffee mug and a plate, leaving the dishes in the sink for Mrs. Drecker to do when

she came in, then Daphne hurried back down the hall to the bedroom.

No longer excessively tidy and impersonal—except after Mrs. Drecker had just left—the bedroom definitely looked lived in, especially with three cats sprawled across the middle of the unmade king-size bed.

Daphne claimed long-term kinship with two of them; Queenie, the aloof gray Persian, and Mack, the fat orange marmalade so named because of his resemblance to a truck, were strays that had taken up residence in her New York apartment years ago. She had brought them with her on her last bi-coastal trip at Adam's urging: It had taken them less than a week to settle into his house, and now they treated it as their own.

The third drowsing feline was a half-grown kitten, christened Tiger, who had wandered up the front walk one foggy night recently, begging for food. He had been fed and offered shelter for the night and had decided to stay.

"Don't bother to get up, guys," Daphne said, rummaging around in the closet among the "few clothes" that were taking up more and more of Adam's rack space. She was trying to find something that would be appropriate for both office hunting and a protest march. Nothing seemed quite right.

She finally settled on a pair of pleated-front, straight-legged camel slacks, a loose ivory silk shirt and a camel Shaker sweater in case the May weather turned breezy. She was just stepping into a pair of low-heeled pumps when the doorbell rang.

"Ah, Mrs. Drecker. Finally," she muttered, as she hurried toward the front door.

It wasn't Mrs. Drecker. "Oh, Sunny, come on in. I was hoping it was the cleaning lady. She's late." She held out her arms to the toddler who was clutching the neckline of Sunny's T-shirt. "Hello, Mollie, me darlin'. How's my favorite redhead?"

The child changed hands willingly. "Mack," she said.

"Right this way." Daphne nuzzled Mollie's neck. "Come on to the bedroom. I haven't quite finished dressing."

"Isn't that a little, um, elegant for a protest?" Sunny said.

"That's just what I was wondering." Daphne set Mollie down on the bed. "It's been years since I've been to one so I wasn't sure what the current mode of dress is," she said, taking in Sunny's olive-green corduroy pants, camouflage T-shirt and Nike running shoes. A tomato-red cashmere sweater was tied around her waist and a diamond the size of a small ice cube graced her left hand. Her inch-long nails matched the sweater.

"Is that what every well-dressed radical is wearing these days? Camouflage and cashmere?"

"What? This old thing?" Sunny picked up a sleeve of her sweater. "Strictly utilitarian."

Daphne snorted and turned toward the mirror to fasten a pair of thin gold chains around her neck. "I guess I'll stick with what I've got on," she said, slipping small gold hoops into her pierced ears. "Besides—I've got to look at some office space this afternoon."

Sunny pounced on that. "Office space? Are you finally moving Night Lights here?"

"No," she replied, but that's *exactly* what she was thinking of doing—if things worked out the way she hoped.

She and Adam had been getting along very well these past six weeks; their relationship was calmer than it had been eleven years ago. More adult. Adam had mellowed nicely and she had become much less volatile. They had both grown up. They were careful of each other's feelings. Solicitous of each other's opinions. Why, they hadn't had one argument.

Was that normal, she wondered.

"So why are you looking for an office?" Sunny prompted.

"Because I've been spending more and more time in San Francisco—" she paused "*—over the last year or so.*" She emphasized the last few words but if anything, Sunny's know-it-all grin got wider.

"All right, you can just wipe that smug, silly look off your face, Elizabeth McCorkle," Daphne said sternly. "I've been thinking about opening a branch office out here for the last six months at least."

"Uh-huh," Sunny snorted.

"Well, I have! I have as many customers here as I do in New York, if not more. In fact, my line sells better in California than it does anywhere else. And it's much closer to Hong Kong," she said. "So it will save me time and money in the long run. On freight and . . . so forth."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, dammit, I can't just keep spreading my stuff all over Adam's house," Daphne said. "Mrs. Drecker is threatening to quit."

"Whatever." Sunny waved a manicured hand dismissively and sat down

on the edge of the unmade bed. "Is it really so hard to admit that you're still crazy in love with Adam and you'd give your eyeteeth to be married to him again?"

Daphne sank down on the bed beside her friend. "If only it were that simple!"

"Why isn't it that simple? You love Adam. Adam loves you. Ergo, wedding bells."

"Ergo, nothing. Yes, I love Adam. I've always loved Adam. And he loves me . . . but that's not the point."

"So what is?"

"The point is, when Adam and I got married it was because I talked him into it. Remember? I wouldn't listen to any of his arguments against it. We were too young, too different. We'd be poor. But I thought nothing mattered except that we loved each other. I'm ashamed to admit it but I even tried using sex to get my way."

Sunny's brown eyes brightened. "Is that what finally did the trick?"

"In a way." Daphne laughed softly, remembering. "Adam always thought that he shouldn't have been sleeping with me in the first place. I was only seventeen when we met, remember? And still pure as the driven snow. I think he felt guilty about leading me down the path to wickedness." Her eyes sparkled gleefully. "Completely forgetting that the first time I practically had to push him into bed." She gave a little shrug. "Anyway, when I threatened to cut him off until he married me, he said he thought abstinence was a good idea." She giggled. "And then I spent the next three days convincing him it wasn't."

"Sounds like fun."

"Mack gone," Mollie said mournfully, standing up on the bed to lean against her mother's shoulder.

"How did that get you married?" Sunny asked.

"When Adam realized that we couldn't keep our hands off each other, we decided to elope. You know the rest." She shook her head slightly, as if to clear it. "Anyway, this new relationship is sort of a...a trial," she said, putting it into words for the first time.

"What?" Sunny's start of surprise sent Mollie tumbling back against the bed. "You mean like a trial marriage? And Adam agreed? Old conservative Adam?"

"We're doing it, aren't we?" Daphne responded. "We both agree that there's something, uh, special between us," she said then, trying to explain it to herself as well. "So we're taking this time to find out what it is—"

"It's called love," Sunny interrupted dryly.

"And if it will last," Daphne went on. "We're getting to know each other again, finding out if we can be friends as well as lovers. If we can live together. Which is exactly why I have to find some office space," she concluded.

She stood up and hauled Sunny to her feet. "Come on. Pick up that child and let's go to this protest of yours before I get smart and change my mind."

THERE WERE already twenty or so people milling around in front of the research center when Sunny pulled her yellow Mercedes station wagon up to the curb.

"Now what?" Daphne said as Sunny set the parking brake.

"Now, we pass out the signs." She gestured over her shoulder. "There's a card table back there, too, for the petition. Jason will set that up." She waved at a young man. "Why don't you get Mollie out of her car seat while I get the signs?"

"Fine," Daphne agreed. "Looks like it's you and me, kid," she said, lifting the child into her arms as she got out of the car. They watched Sunny organize her troops.

In less than five minutes she had everyone wearing black armbands—for the deceased animals, Daphne decided—and marching in front of the medical research center. Most carried one of Sunny's hand-lettered signs. Stop Slaughtering Our Pets and Vivisection Is Killing Puppies seemed to be the favorites. A few carried placards with rather gruesome representations of small animals that had apparently been the unfortunate victims of medical research.

It was an emotional, heart-wrenching scene—as Sunny had fully intended it should be—because no one, no matter what side of the question they stood on, wanted to think of their own beloved pet ending up as an experiment.

And that was why, despite some reservations, Daphne had agreed to come today.

"Here, let me tie this on," Sunny said, wrapping a strip of black cloth around Daphne's biceps. "You, too, sweetheart." She tied another one around Mollie's plump little arm, and for the first time Daphne noticed that her sweatshirt sported a grinning dog face and the legend, I Love my Dachshund. Mollie didn't have a dachshund.

"Have you no shame?" Daphne chided mildly. "Using your own child as propaganda?"

"Mollie'd love her dachshund if she had one," Sunny said, taking the child from Daphne's arms. "Hold on tight to Jason," she urged as he lifted Mollie to his shoulders.

Mollie clutched the young man's hair with both hands. "Gid'up," she ordered gleefully.

Jason galloped to his place in the picket line.

Sunny thrust a sign into Daphne's hands and hoisted her own. "Come on, the TV crews should be here any minute."

The police arrived before the TV crew but apparently only as a precaution. Aside from warning the protesters not to block the sidewalk or physically harass anyone going in or out of the building, they merely watched. And waited.

Daphne waited, too, shielding her face behind her picket sign, and hoped Sunny had been wrong. She wasn't. The TV crew arrived ten minutes later.

At a signal from Sunny, the protesters began to chant louder, thrusting their signs into the air as the Minicam zoomed in.

"Excuse me, ma'am," a reporter said, thrusting a microphone under Daphne's nose. "Could you tell us what you hope to gain by this demonstration?"

Daphne ducked behind her sign, pointing at Sunny. "Ask her," she mumbled.

"Excuse me, ma'am..." The reporter repeated her question to Sunny.

"We hope to arouse public concern for what's going on in that—" she

gestured "—that torture chamber there."

"Torture chamber? Don't you think that's a bit strong?" the reporter said. "You make it sound like a concentration camp for animals when, in fact—"

"Isn't that what it is?" Sunny interrupted. "Tell me what else you would call it when perfectly healthy cats and dogs—*children's pets*—are being purchased from city pounds to be used in painful, crippling and unnecessary experiments."

"Poor puppy," Mollie said, her high childish voice clearly audible over the noise of the crowd. The reporter—and the Minicam—turned their attention to the adorable three-year-old on Jason's shoulders.

"Do you have a pet, honey?" the reporter said gently, taking her cue from the front of Mollie's sweatshirt.

"Poor puppy," Mollie repeated, her bottom lip out. "Poor, poor puppy." She was shaking her head sadly.

"Shame on you!" Daphne hissed in Sunny's ear. "Teaching that child to tell lies."

"What lies?" Sunny hissed back, brown eyes wide and innocent. "All she said was 'poor puppy.'"

"...this is Karen Zachary, reporting live from the Hillman Medical Research Center." The Minicam was lowered, the reporter and her crew hurried back to their van.

Sunny handed her placard to one of the other protesters and opened her arms, lifting Mollie from Jason's shoulders. "Mommy's brilliant little girl," she said delightedly. "Say goodbye to Jason."

"Does this mean we're leaving now?" Daphne asked. "That's it? Five

minutes in front of the cameras is all the protesting you're going to do? Elizabeth McCorkle, I'm surprised at you!"

"Why?" Sunny was strapping Mollie into her car seat. "I've done my part here today. Jason and some of the others will stay for most of the afternoon and try to get some more signatures on that petition."

"And just what was your part?" asked Daphne.

"Focusing media attention on an issue of vital importance," Sunny said promptly. "By giving that reporter something more interesting to film than a bunch of people carrying signs. I've practically assured our cause a spot on the nightly news. And maybe we can stop what's going on in there." She waved at Jason and slid behind the wheel. Daphne scrambled in. "Now," Sunny said, "where shall I drop you?"

ADAM'S forest-green BMW was in the driveway when Daphne's taxi pulled up at his Russian Hill address.

Damn, she thought, paying the driver. *One of the few days Adam gets home from the hospital before six and I'm not here to greet him.* The perfect opportunity to show him what suitable doctor's wife material she had turned into was down the drain because of a rental agent's faulty transmission. Well, if she was lucky, she thought, he had only just come in himself.

She hurried up the brick path, mentally reviewing the contents of the refrigerator, and unlocked the front door. Holding her breath, she pushed it open. The living room was clean and tidy. Mrs. Drecker hadn't quit yet.

She continued down the hall toward the low hum of voices coming from the bedroom.

Fresh from the shower, Adam was stretched out on top of the striped bedspread, propped up on a pile of pillows at the teak headboard. His long hairy legs were crossed at the ankle. A wedge of his equally hairy chest was exposed between the open edges of a white terry bathrobe. He was surrounded by cats: Mack, sprawled across his stomach; Queenie, perched on the headboard; and Tiger on the bedside table with his paw in a ceramic bowl, fishing for an M&M.

"Hi," Adam said, looking up as she entered the room. "You're just in time. Sunny called a few minutes ago and said to be sure to tell you to watch the evening news." He popped an M&M in his mouth. "I was going to tape it for you but this is much better." His smile was warm and welcoming. "Come watch with me," he invited. "There's plenty of M&Ms for everybody."

Daphne stepped out of her shoes. "Best offer I've had all day," she quipped, crawling across the bed to cuddle up in the warm curve of his arm. It closed around her, drawing her in. "Umm." She snuggled against his side. "Heaven."

"Don't I get a kiss hello?"

Daphne looked up at him. "Depends. Do I get an M&M?"

He held one up in front of her. "Trade?"

Daphne tilted her head back, eyes closed, and opened her mouth.

The kiss was deep and satisfying and quickly threatened to develop into something more. Adam's big body shifted toward hers, but Mack dug his claws in, protesting the move.

Adam fell back. "Damn cat's trying to emasculate me," he said, and dropped the M&M into Daphne's mouth.

Daphne chewed and swallowed before answering. "Get tough," she suggested. "Tell him to move."

"Move," Adam ordered, and Mack opened one yellow eye. Disgruntled, he rose, stretched languidly, and stalked off to the more settled regions at the foot of the bed.

"You're so forceful," Daphne sighed, "and I'm a sucker for forceful men." Her hand was plucking deliberately at the fine hairs around Adam's navel.

Adam's stomach muscles contracted. He growled playfully and turned toward her, one hand pushing hers even farther down his stomach. "I'll show you forceful."

Daphne giggled, her eyes golden with desire. "Promise?"

His mouth came down on hers just as her fingers closed around him. Daphne felt him jerk, his muscles tightened in reaction to her touch, and then his tongue invaded her mouth, filling her with the taste of him. It was a long sweet moment before either of them moved except to press closer.

"I missed you today," he murmured. "All day I thought about you. About this." He moved his hips against her hand. "It played hell with my concentration."

A part of Daphne thrilled to his words, but another part of her stood back, hoping for more. He missed her, he wanted her, but did he love her? She *thought* he did, hoped he did, but in the past six weeks he had never said the words.

"I missed you, too," she said softly, then she pulled his head back down to hers, afraid that if her lips were free, she might say the words he wasn't ready to hear.

"Helpless animals are being systematically tortured..." Sunny's voice broke through their building passion.

"The TV," Daphne murmured, shifting a little.

"Hmm?" Adam turned to squint at the television. "Oh, God, Sunny's on the warpath again!" Adam chuckled and levered himself from Daphne's supine form. He lifted her a little more upright so she could see the television, too. "I wonder if poor Brian knew what screwball thing she was up to today."

Daphne cringed at his words, and hoped that the camera hadn't caught her face, too.

"Poor puppy," Mollie piped up right on cue.

Adam hooted. "She's got Mollie in the act, too! Brian will be fit to be tied."

"Do you really think he'll be angry?" Daphne began hesitantly. "I mean it *is* a good cause... isn't it?"

Adam shook his head, his eyes on the TV screen. "Animal research is absolutely vital to the advancement of medical science. And if Sunny would stop letting her emotions rule her head for a minute, she'd realize it."

The camera angle changed again, slowly panning back to bring the reporter—and the protesters—into full view.

Daphne's body stiffened, anticipating the explosion.

"Good God, that's you!" Adam shot upright on the bed.

For just a moment, Daphne considered denying it. But, "Yes, I guess it is," she admitted reluctantly, struggling to sit up as the screen faded into a close-up of the anchorman back at the studio.

Adam turned to look at her. "I didn't know you were going to be involved in that today," he said calmly.

"I didn't, either," Daphne hurried to explain. "That is, I knew I was going, but not about the reporter and—"

"Hey," Adam halted her. "You don't owe me any explanations. You can get involved in as many, er, causes," he said judiciously, "as you want to. It has nothing to do with me." He swung his feet to the floor. "So, what do you say we go get something to eat?" he said.

The subject, she realized, was closed. Instead of yelling at her as he would have eleven years ago, instead of telling her what an idiot she was making of herself, he'd very calmly said that it had nothing to do with him. Didn't he care what she did?

Daphne sat upright, Indian fashion. "I thought we might eat in tonight," she said, her voice as calm as his.

"Sure, if you like. What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I don't know. Whatever's in the kitchen."

Adam looked doubtful. "I don't think there's much of a choice. But I'll see what I have."

Daphne was up off the bed. "Oh, no. I didn't mean for you to make it, Adam. I just feel like doing something domestic tonight, that's all."

"Domestic? You?"

She scowled at him. "I get these impulses once in a while. Even I can get tired of eating out all the time."

"We could order something in," he suggested.

"I get tired of that, too," Daphne said, wondering why he still seemed so intent on treating her like a guest.

"Why don't you just relax. Here on the bed," she invited. "Let *me* see what's in the kitchen. Come on." She propelled him back to the bed. "Relax. Let Dan Rather tell you what's going on in the world." She plucked the bowl off the bedside table. "Have some more M&Ms," she advised. "I'll get you a nice glass of white wine."

"With M&Ms?"

"So, I'll get you a glass of rosé," she said airily. "It goes with everything."

The refrigerator was better stocked than the first time she had looked into it, but not by much. A quart of cream, several half-full foil-covered cans of Seafood Supper, Creamed Kidney Bits and Chicken Nibbles, a carton of eggs, a closed plastic container with a selection of cheeses, three different kinds of deli meat, a loaf of sourdough bread, jars of pickles and olives, a six-pack of imported beer, several bottles of wine; all the ingredients for tomorrow's picnic but not the makings of a great meal.

"Noodles," she said to herself, remembering a package in one of the cupboards. She could make a halfway decent fettuccine Alfredo with those noodles and what was on hand in the refrigerator.

She filled a large pan with water and set it on the stove. Opening a bottle of the promised rosé, she carried it back into the bedroom with two long-stemmed glasses.

"Dan Rather's on vacation," Adam said sheepishly, explaining why the TV was now tuned to reruns of "The Love Boat."

Daphne flashed him a knowing look. "You have the most juvenile taste in TV shows," she said, pouring a glass of wine. "Well, enjoy." She handed it to him with a flourish. "I'm going to go take a quick shower."

Adam leered up at her. "Need some help?"

"I said a *quick* shower."

But her shower wasn't as quick as she'd planned. She couldn't find the shower cap so her hair got wet and she ended up washing it. Which meant drying it, too. Finally, she slipped a silky peach-colored caftan over her head. It had a wide V-neck, fluttery split sleeves and a hem that brushed against her ankles. It was also very nearly transparent.

Deftly, she touched up her makeup and fluffed up her hair. *The very picture of wifely devotion*, she decided.

Despite a slight delay, she had finally managed to put her plan into action. Adam had his glass of wine, she had slipped into something slinky, dinner was well on its way to being done.

The only problem was that Adam was sound asleep. The wineglass, empty now, tilted precariously from his right hand. Mack had crawled back up on his stomach and lay sprawled in feline abandon.

Daphne stood silently for a few moments, disappointment building inside her. Then she sighed in resignation and moved across the carpet on bare feet. They would have all day tomorrow together, she reminded herself.

*

"WAKE UP, sleeping beauty." Daphne leaned over the figure on the bed, waving a cup of freshly brewed coffee back and forth near Adam's nose.

His nostrils twitched, but he didn't wake.

My sleeping Greek god, she thought tenderly, feeling the urge to brush the hair back from his forehead.

Instead, she blew gently across the top of the cup. "I've got coffee," she singsonged. "Wake up."

Adam's nostrils twitched again, narrowing as he inhaled deeply. "Coffee?" he said groggily, and rolled to his side. He pulled on her caftan then, tugging until she was forced to sit down on the bed.

"Careful, Adam," she warned. "You'll make me spill it."

"Put it down," he suggested, rolling over onto his back again. His eyes were fully open now, and Daphne recognized his expression.

"Oh, no, you don't," she said, laughing. "You promised we'd go to the park today. Have a picnic, remember?"

Silently, still smiling that sexy sleepy little smile of his, Adam took the coffee cup from her and placed it on the bedside table.

"You mentioned roller-skating, too," she reminded him. "And then maybe some shopping."

His left arm curled around her back, drawing her down. Daphne pretended to resist. The loose open neckline of her caftan slid halfway down her arm, completely baring her left shoulder and breast. Daphne ignored it.

"Then there was dinner at that new Chinese place and dancing at—"

"Hmm," Adam said. "We will." His lips touched her bare shoulder. "Later."

"Uh-huh," Daphne scoffed. "How much later?"

Adam grinned lazily. "About thirty minutes later?" he suggested, touching his lips to the upper slope of her bared breast.

Daphne sighed, melting against him. "Only thirty minutes?"

Adam laughed softly, deep in his chest, and rolled over, carrying Daphne with him so that she ended up on her back beneath him, her legs trapped by the sheet that had been covering his golden body. His left arm was still wrapped around her back, making her spine arch, thrusting her breasts forward like an offering.

"We'll take as long as you want," he promised, his voice no longer teasing as his eyes made a slow, thorough survey of her lush breasts. The right one was only lightly veiled, but her left breast was totally bared to his heated gaze.

He moved his right hand, cupping her exposed breast in his palm, and lowered his head. He took the puckered nipple into the warmth of his mouth, laving it with quick little flicks of his tongue. It hardened instantly, drawing up, tightening, aching for a firmer pressure. Instinctively, Adam began to suckle more strongly, his cheeks flexing as he took as much of her breast into his mouth as he could.

Daphne arched even farther off the mattress, lifting up to him, feeling the sensual, primal pull of his mouth all the way to her womb. She moaned softly, seeking a way to touch him.

Adam lifted his head. "What?" he murmured.

"I can't move," she breathed. "Can't touch you."

Adam shifted, turning and lifting her body until she lay on top of him. "Better?"

"Hmm, yes. Much." She sat up in one fluid motion, her knees sliding open to straddle his hips. With a sensuous little roll of her shoulder, she dropped the right side of her caftan and slipped both arms out of the sleeves.

She looked both elegant and sensual sitting there astride him, her long smooth torso rising up out of the peach silk draped around her hips.

Adam lay passive for a moment, drinking her in with his eyes, and then he raised his hands to her waist, sliding them down under the peach silk to curve around the swell of her hips. His thumbs touched the soft, curling hair that hid the secrets of her body.

Daphne's eyes lifted, meeting his, and her palms continued smoothing the hair-roughened sinews of his forearms until they came to rest on the backs of his hands, stopping them. For a moment she hovered there, her hands covering his, devouring him with a heated gaze of her own.

Then Adam's hands tightened under hers, demanding, and Daphne surged forward. She pressed her soft full breasts to Adam's chest, her belly to his belly, her lips to his lips.

As if in slow motion, Adam rolled over again, pressing her down into the mattress. His mouth took hers in a gently savage kiss and his hands palmed her breasts, kneading their fullness with gentle skill. Urgently, maddeningly, his hips ground into the cradle of her open thighs, tempting her with that part of him that was still

separated from her by the thin layers of peach silk and crisp brown sheets.

Daphne whimpered slightly, wanting more, and Adam lifted himself off her, turning to one side to help her rid them of this last impediment to their lovemaking. Then he was on her again, entering her slowly, moving slowly, driving her mad.

Daphne ran her hands down his sleek back, her nails scraping lightly along the indentation of his spine, reveling in the feel of the muscles that rolled beneath her fingers with each slow thrust of his hips. She smoothed her palms down the slight inward slope at the small of his back and over the hard curve of his buttocks. There her fingers tightened, pressing, urging him to a more frantic pace. But Adam refused to be hurried.

Even as he moved within her, even as he whispered soft, sexy words into the damp curve of her neck, she could feel him holding back some essential part of himself. But she was too far gone to figure out what it was. Her hips bucked beneath him, urging, hungry, out of control.

"That's it," he murmured into her mouth. "Let it go. Let it come," he urged, retaining his control, his awareness of self and place, to the end, holding back until she had cried out in mindless pleasure... once, twice. And then, deliberately, he let go, thrusting forward into her welcoming body with a fierce cry of his own.

It was wonderful. It was satisfying. It left her sated and replete. But it wasn't the same as if he, too, had gone beyond control, had lost himself in loving her.

They lay tangled together for a moment more, letting the world right it-

self around them, and then Adam levered himself up and off her and rolled over onto his back.

"I bet my coffee's gotten cold," he said, grinning at her out of the corner of his eye.

For just a moment, Daphne contemplated grabbing the cup and pouring its contents over his head. That he could lie there looking so natural and so... *relaxed*, *dammit*, while she was still trembling inside from the strength of her response, made her want to scream. *How can you be so blasé*, she wanted to shout. *Don't you care?*

Instead, she calmly leaned over his supine body and stuck the tip of her index finger in the coffee cup. "Still warm," she said, drawing back with the cup in her hand. "Here." She gave him a look over her shoulder, and disappeared into the bathroom.

THE TELEPHONE rang as Daphne was trying to fit a second bottle of wine into the picnic basket.

She let it ring, sensing that it was the hospital. Adam, she knew, would answer it from the bedroom extension. Five minutes later he came bustling out to the kitchen, a worried look on his handsome face.

Daphne was already unloading the picnic basket.

"That was the hospital," he said unnecessarily, shrugging into a tan suede sport coat as he spoke. "Tiffany Jenkins has developed an infection." The little girl had had her third skin graft operation less than a week ago. "I've got to go. I—I'm sorry, Daffy, but this is important."

"You've got to go to the hospital. I know."

Adam stood there speechless, not knowing what to say.

"Hey, it's all right," she said, forcing a bright little smile past the lump in her throat. "I understand."

Adam looked skeptical.

"Really, I do." She came over to him.

Adam put his hands on her shoulders, knees slightly bent as he tried to look into her face. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Of course I *mind*," Daphne said. "But I understand."

"And you're not mad?" Adam's voice was still doubtful.

"No, I'm not mad," she denied. *For God's sake, Daphne, try to act like a reasonable adult! A canceled picnic isn't the end of the world.* "I'm disappointed, that's all. I was looking forward to spending the whole day with you."

"I know." Adam squeezed her shoulders. "I was, too."

"Maybe you won't be all day?" Daphne asked hopefully.

"It's hard to say. Maybe. It depends on exactly what the problem is." She could tell he was anxious to be off.

"You'd better get going," she said in a flat little voice.

He looked for a moment as if he wanted to say something more, something...important. Instead, he reached out, curling his hand around the back of her head, and lifted her into his kiss. It wasn't quick. It wasn't distracted. It was long and thorough and turned Daphne's knees to jelly. "I'll be home as soon as I can," he whispered. "Wait for me."

She finished dealing with the contents of the picnic basket, merely transferring everything, still neatly

wrapped, to a shelf in the refrigerator. She was skeptical that Adam would be back in time for a picnic that afternoon—but maybe tomorrow.

She went back into the bedroom then, intending to do a little light housekeeping. Mrs. Drecker wouldn't be in again until Monday, and a whole weekend of not picking up after herself would make Adam's lovely house look like a tornado had hit it.

"You guys can have it back in a minute," she told the cats, shooing them off so she could make the bed. When she'd finished, they clambered back up, settling in for their mid-morning nap.

The phone rang for the second time that morning, surprising her with yesterday's clothes bundled up in her arms. She dropped them on a convenient chair.

"Hello?" She sat down on the bed. "Oh, hi, Sunny. What's up?"

"We've arranged another little demo at the research center. I thought you might like to come with me."

"Two days in a row? Don't you ever give it a rest?"

"Nope. Do you want to come?"

"Well, I don't know," Daphne hedged. "Adam didn't seem too thrilled to see me on the news last night and—"

"You mean to tell me you're going to let Adam, a man you're not even married to, dictate your conscience? Daphne Granger, I'm surprised at you."

"He's not dictating my conscience," Daphne defended him.

"So, are you just going to sit home and do nothing?"

"Well, I..."

"Hundreds of people's pets, cats just like Mack, are being slaughtered."

"Yes, but..." Oh, what the hell, Daphne thought. *I haven't got anything better to do today.* "Okay, sure, pick me up."

"Good," Sunny said approvingly. "I knew I could count on you."

"Now I know why you're so good at fund raising," Daphne said, as they drove to the research center. "Nobody would dare say no to you."

Sunny grinned. "Persistence has its uses."

"Intimidation, you mean."

"Who, *moi*?" Sunny said.

"Yes, you!" Daphne replied as they pulled up across from the research center.

Daphne followed her friend across the street to the group marching in a tight circle in front of the center.

She recognized a few faces from the day before, but the mood was different today. More unsettled and... rebellious.

Someone handed Daphne a sign and she took it automatically, as Sunny tied on a black armband.

The protesters were chanting loudly, thrusting their placards into the air with youthful zeal. As she began marching, Daphne noticed a squad car parked halfway down the street. There were two uniformed policemen sitting inside, silently watching again.

"Stop vivisection now!" the protesters chanted. "Vivisection is murdering our pets!"

Suddenly, someone hurled a brick through the front window of the research center. Glass went flying in every direction. Several people fell to

the ground, protecting their heads with crossed arms. A woman screamed. Protest signs clattered to the sidewalk. A police siren blared.

Daphne's first instinct was to run. But she couldn't move. She just stood there, frozen, as another brick sailed through the half-shattered window, breaking the spell that held her captive. She started to turn away, looking for Sunny, when someone grabbed her wrist. She jerked away, startled, and dropped her sign.

"Come on now, lady. You don't want to add resisting arrest to the rest of it, do you?"

Cold steel clamped around her delicate wrist and Daphne looked up into the eyes of a uniformed policeman.

"But I didn't... I wasn't..."

He gave her a little shove, urging her toward the police paddy wagon that had appeared on the scene. Another policeman stood by the open rear door, helping handcuffed protesters into the back.

Someone jostled her and she glanced up as Sunny, her hands cuffed behind her back, stumbled into the seat across from her.

"This is all your fault," Daphne hissed.

"My fault?" Somehow, Sunny managed to look indignant. "I didn't throw that brick." She grinned. "But I'd sure like to thank whoever did."

"What!"

"Just think of all the publicity," Sunny said gleefully.

"This is going to make the papers, isn't it? And the evening news?"

"I sure hope so."

"Adam is going to bust a gut," Daphne said.

THE HANDCUFFS were removed as soon as they got to the police station. Daphne rubbed her wrists, surprised there were no bruises, and looked around her with wide eyes.

She had only been in a police station once before, that time when she had tried to hit the TV cameraman over the head with her protest sign. She hadn't liked it then. She didn't like it now.

"How long do you think we'll be here?" Daphne asked.

"I don't know. Hours probably," Sunny replied.

And it was hours. One by one, they were booked, searched, fingerprinted and photographed like common criminals. The charges were disorderly conduct and criminal mischief, both misdemeanors. Then, finally, a judge arraigned them, setting bail at two hundred dollars apiece, payable in cash. Neither Daphne nor Sunny had that much on them.

"Now what happens?" Daphne asked hesitantly.

"You can call someone to come down with the money," an officer told her. "A family member or friend. Or a bail bondsman. In the meantime you wait in the tank."

The "tank" was segregated by sex, one for men, one for women. It was the worst place Daphne had ever been. But finally, the two women were allowed their phone call.

"I got hold of Brian," Sunny said.

"Was he mad?"

"Are you kidding? I could feel the steam coming right through the telephone wire."

"But he's coming to get us?" Daphne asked hopefully.

"He said he ought to let us stew for a while but, yes, he's coming to get us." She patted Daphne's hand. "Are you sure you don't want to call Adam?"

Daphne shook her head. "I don't want to bother him at the hospital. If he's home now, I left a note telling him I'd gone out with you for a little while."

"Oh, that'll put his mind at ease."

Brian arrived forty minutes later. He wasn't nearly so angry as Sunny had indicated. In fact, he now seemed to see the funny side of things. Adam, however, apparently didn't see anything funny in the situation at all.

"I didn't tell Brian to call him," Sunny whispered. "Honest!"

"Well, well, if it isn't the two little jailbirds," Brian said teasingly. But he hugged Sunny hard. "Are you all right?" he said against her hair.

"Fine, now that you're here," she replied.

Daphne wished she were being held, too. But Adam just stood there, a somewhat wary expression on his face as he waited for her to claim her valuables. He was, she thought, absolutely furious with her. She didn't blame him. She was furious with herself.

"Are you all right?" he asked when she came away from the desk. His voice was low, his words clipped.

"Yes, Adam," she said, head down. "Fine."

He reached out and lifted her chin with his forefinger, forcing her to look at him. "You're sure you're all right? We heard that there was broken glass."

"No," she said softly. "I wasn't near the glass. I'm fine."

"Good." His hand dropped. "Then, shall we go?" he said.

They exited the police station to the glow of the late afternoon sunlight slanting across the pavement—and the flash of a newsman's camera exploding in their faces.

"What the hell—" Adam began, shielding his face. He drew Daphne closer; as if to shield her, too.

"Dr. McCorkle, how do you feel about your wife being involved in the anti-vivisection protest?"

"No comment," Brian muttered, heading his wife toward the yellow Mercedes. Adam and Daphne crossed to the forest-green BMW parked right behind it.

"Dr. Forrest, how does having your wife involved in a criminal protest against a medical research center affect your new position at Children's Hospital?"

Daphne's eyes widened at that. She hadn't given a thought to how this might affect Adam. At least, not careerwise. After all, she wasn't his wife anymore. Even if she were, it should have no bearing. She opened her mouth to say, "I'm not Mrs.—" but a hand clamped down on her arm, silencing her.

"We have no comment," Adam snapped, assisting Daphne into the passenger seat of his BMW. He stalked around to the driver's side, inserted the key into the ignition and gunned the engine to life. And then careful, controlled, always-in-charge Adam left rubber on the road as he peeled away from the curb.

Daphne sat silently, unable to think of anything to say to defuse his anger. "If I had known what Sunny was up to," she offered at last, "I wouldn't have gotten involved."

Adam didn't even glare at her. "A bit late for regrets, isn't it?" he said, downshifting as the car crested one of San Francisco's famous hills.

"I didn't say I *regretted* getting involved," Daphne snapped back. "But, I'm sorry you had to get involved."

"I suppose you'd rather I just left you sitting in jail?"

"Brian would have bailed me out," she said, shrugging.

"Brian would not!" Adam exploded. "You're my responsibility!"

Daphne's head came up, all her senses ready—eager—to do battle. "I am not your responsibility," she said firmly, as Adam turned onto their street.

He swung the car into the driveway, bringing it to an abrupt halt only inches from the garage door. Daphne reached for the door handle, then stopped when she realized that Adam hadn't turned off the engine. "Do you intend to finish this—discussion out here? In front of all your neighbors?"

"I don't want to finish it at all. I have to go back to the hospital." He revved the engine as if to emphasize his impatience.

"Oh, that's right!" Daphne said. "Hide behind your white coat. Well, I've got news for you, doctor. Your problems will still be waiting for you when you get back," she informed him icily, shoving the car door open.

He turned. "Will they?" he said, very softly.

For just a moment Daphne hesitated, caught by the look on his face. It was hopeful and worried at the same time. She almost said something soothing, but then she realized the car was still running.

"Count on it!" she shouted, springing out of the car before he could say another word. Tires squealed as Adam roared off down the street. "Damn the man!" she cursed aloud, wishing she had something to throw. "He hasn't changed a bit!"

Oh, he was older, smoother, more expert with words of love. No, not love, she thought. *Seduction*. He knew all the right words to say when he had her in his arms. But when it came to emotion, he was as closemouthed as ever. Be it love or hate or anger, he couldn't say the words. Couldn't tell her what was in his heart.

Well, that was coming to an end! And soon. Very soon. She would wait until he cooled off, and then she would confront him with her feelings, all of them, and demand that he expose his own. There would be no more pussy-footing around the edges of this relationship. If it was love, the real, committed, ending-in-marriage, forever kind of love, she wanted to know. And if it was just a sexual fling...well, she wanted to know that, too.

Somewhat calmer now that she had made a decision, she walked through the deserted house to the bedroom, shrugging out of her jumpsuit as she went. She dropped it on top of the wicker clothes hamper and reached into the shower to turn on the taps. Her jumpsuit wasn't all that felt dirty after her little run-in with the law.

The phone was ringing as she stepped out of the shower. For a moment, she considered not answering it. Then she reached for the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Thank goodness I finally got you." Elaine sounded breathless. "I've been

calling all afternoon. Where have you been?"

Daphne hitched her towel a little more securely around her damp body. "Believe me. You don't want to know." She sighed. "So—what's the problem?"

"Mr. Chan is here *now* and he's leaving tomorrow night. And he wants to see you. I told him you'd—"

"What happened to our Wednesday meeting?" Daphne said.

"His oldest grandson is having surgery on Tuesday—or is it Wednesday? Anyway, he wants to be back and that means he's here now, two days ahead of schedule."

"Can't you handle it?" Daphne inquired. "You're a partner."

"I told him that, Daphne. But he insists on seeing you. You know how he is about dealing with the 'head man.'"

"Yes, I know." Mr. Chan had the worst timing in the world! She needed to be *here* right now, dealing with Adam. But business was business. And Mr. Chan was there about the fabrics for her new lingerie line. She had to see him now, too, if the line was going to launch on schedule. Damn!

"Daphne, you there?"

"Yes." Her voice was resigned. "Have someone meet the next San Francisco plane at La Guardia. Unless you hear otherwise, I'll be on it. And send a basket of fruit to Mr. Chan's suite with my—*our*—compliments. And make reservations at someplace fancy for dinner tomorrow night for three. You, me and Mr. Chan. It's high time he got used to dealing with someone other than me. Yes. Bye."

Daphne pressed down on the telephone button, breaking the connec-

tion with New York, and dialed the airlines. Then, she called a taxi and finished putting herself together.

In less than twenty minutes she was dressed in trim ankle-length slacks and a matching unlined jacket in a nubby beige fabric with a russet-colored string knit sweater beneath it. Large copper discs adorned her ears. She stuffed a few essentials into a large carryall and headed for Adam's den to write a note.

While dressing, she had debated whether or not to call him, but just thinking of his thundercloud of a face put her right off that idea. A note, she decided, was the safest bet.

As she was writing it, she heard the front door open. Apparently the decision had been taken out of her hands. "I'm in here, Adam," she called.

There was no answer.

Daphne came out of the den. "I was just writing you a note," she explained. "I know it's terrible timing but I have to fly to New..." Her voice trailed off as she saw who it was. "Oh, hello, Marcia," she said coolly to the younger woman. They had silently agreed to a truce of sorts; at least there were no outright hostilities. "I'm afraid Adam had an emergency at the hospital."

"Yes, I know exactly what kind of emergency Adam had. It's all over the hospital that he had to go down to the police station and bail out his ex-wife!"

"Oh, dear," Daphne said, sincerely sorry and sincerely distressed. Above almost anything else in life, Adam valued his professional image. Quite rightly, too, she thought, since he had worked so hard to attain it.

"Is that all you can say? 'Oh, dear'?" Adam's sister scoffed. "Not

that I expected anything better of you after what Adam's told me." She advanced on Daphne like a lioness all set to defend her cub. If looks could kill...

"I told him you'd be nothing but trouble! I told him that you still had the same crazy, radical friends and believed in the same stupid causes. That you were no better doctor's wife material now than the first time around. And you've proved it." A particularly nasty smile curved her pink lips. "Now maybe he'll listen to me."

"Maybe," Daphne agreed softly, her voice as level and calm as she could make it as she digested the rather disturbing fact that Adam had obviously discussed their relationship with his viper of a sister.

"Maybe?" Marcia's voice rose to a near shriek. With a visible effort, she controlled it. "Oh, he'll listen all right. He can't help but listen with the evidence right in front of him."

"Maybe," Daphne said again. She brushed past Marcia and went into the kitchen to tape her note to the refrigerator door, crumpling her earlier one. "That's something we'll have to discuss when I get back." She gave Marcia a deliberately arch look. "Adam and I, that is." She paused considerably. "Although, if what you say is true, I'm sure Adam will let you know what we decide."

A horn sounded outside, three sharp blasts, and Daphne silently blessed the efficiency of San Francisco taxi companies. "That will be my cab," she said, heading for the front door. "Feel free to make yourself at home until Adam gets back. I'm sure he won't be long. And I'm sure you'll have plenty to say to him," she said sweetly, and left.

"MRS. GRANGER." Elaine's assistant hurried into the workroom, her manner flustered. "There's a man in the lobby. He insists on seeing you and he... he's *drunk!*"

"I am not drunk," corrected Adam, coming in behind her. "I have been drinking," he said. "Two brandies, to be precise. The second of which the flight attendant spilled all over my jacket."

Daphne just stared. Never, ever had she seen Adam in this condition. Maybe he wasn't drunk, she thought, but he certainly looked it.

"Adam, what are you doing here?" She rose to her feet, truly alarmed. Adam all undone was a frightening sight. "What's wrong?"

"You're what's wrong," he said, coming toward her with purposeful strides.

Daphne shrank back from the murderous look in his eyes. "Me?" she squeaked.

"Yes, you!" He grabbed her by the upper arms, completely oblivious to the four grinning women and one puzzled Chinese man who stood gaping at them. "You've run out on me for the last time. Is that clear, Daffy?"

"No, Adam, I don't. I—"

"The last time, Daffy," he repeated. "I won't let you leave me again."

"I haven't left you, Adam. I had a meeting with Mr. Chan—that couldn't be put off. I was coming right back."

"You *left* me," he went on angrily. "Again. Without a goodbye. Without even a note to tell me where you'd gone."

"But I left you a note. I—"

"Without a note!" he roared. "I had to find out from Marcia that you'd

gone back to New York. You were too much of a coward to tell me yourself."

"Marcia?" Daphne said, stunned. And then it hit her. Obviously Marcia had destroyed her note. "That bitch!"

"You leave my sister out of this, do you hear me?" He shook her. "This is between you and me."

Daphne wrenched herself out of his hands, furious now. Neither of them spared a thought for their fascinated audience. "Don't you yell at me!" she shouted. "Yell at that interfering sister of yours!"

"Marcia, hell! It's *you* who ran off at the first sign of trouble, *you* who couldn't face up to what you had done."

"It was for a good cause!" Daphne defended herself.

"That's beside the point."

"And just what is the point, Dr. Forrest?" she asked.

"The point is *you*." He jabbed a forefinger into her chest for emphasis. "Why the hell can't you act like a reasonable adult instead of some flaky, irresponsible hippie?"

"I was never a hippie! You just thought so because you were always such a pompous stuffed shirt. And I did not run away!" she added furiously. "You divorced *me*, remember?" she reminded him angrily. "And you haven't changed one bit."

"I haven't changed? You're the one who hasn't changed," Adam roared.

"Even love," Daphne continued as if Adam hadn't spoken. "Oh, I should have known it wouldn't work," she cried. "I don't know what made me think it would. I guess I just wanted it so much that I didn't think it through."

Adam clamped her shoulders tighter. "I want it, too!" he shouted.

"Want what?" Daphne shouted back.

"You! I want you to come back to me."

Daphne went very, very still. "Why?" she demanded.

"Because you're my wife!"

Daphne shook her head stubbornly. "Not anymore."

"Then because I love you, dammit!" he bellowed.

Daphne's mouth fell open. It wasn't the way she had envisioned him saying he loved her. But he had said it. And it was the sweetest, most wonderful thing she had ever heard. "Oh, Adam," she whispered. "Adam." It was the only word she seemed able to say. It was enough.

Adam slid his hands from her shoulders to her back, enfolding her in a tentative embrace. "And because you love me, too," he said softly. He hesitated a moment before kissing her, his eyes hopeful. "Don't you?"

"Oh, Adam." Daphne threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Adam, you fool. Yes!" she said, punctuating her words with quick little kisses. "Yes, yes, yes."

His mouth came down on hers then, abruptly stopping the joyous flow of words. He pulled her more firmly to his body, his arms hard around her, his eyes glistening with unshed tears of happiness. Their lips touched... and parted... and touched again.

"I love you," he whispered into her mouth, his hands firm and warm against her back.

"I love you," she echoed, as she tangled her fingers in his tousled hair.

She pulled his head closer, demanding more.

"Way 'ta go, Gorgeous!" Elaine's voice, brimming with laughter, urged them on.

Adam raised his head a fraction and looked around. Four beaming female faces, and one very puzzled male one, were watching them with avid interest. Adam blushed, as spontaneously, the women burst into applause. Mr. Chan, not wanting to do the incorrect thing, joined them.

Daphne grinned happily and executed a sketchy little bow. "Elaine, you're in charge," Adam said, dragging Daphne toward the door.

"But Mr. Chan..." Daphne sputtered.

"I'll take care of him." Elaine slipped her arm through Mr. Chan's. "We'll get along just fine, won't we?" she said.

Mr. Chan smiled tentatively and bowed.

"AND YOU'D really thought I'd left you for good?"

"Really." Adam finished lathering up his hands and reached beneath the water for her foot. Holding her heel in one hand, he began to massage the floral-scented soap over her arch and between her toes. "What else was I supposed to think?" he asked. "I come home to an empty house. Three hungry cats, begging to be fed. No Daphne. No note."

"I already explained to you about that."

"Yes," he said. He put her left foot down and picked up the other one. "I intend to have a little heart-to-heart with my baby sister when we get back."

"Don't be too hard on her, Adam," Daphne advised. "She was only trying to save you from yourself." She grinned wickedly. "And me."

Adam grinned back. That slow, sleepy, utterly sexy grin that turned her bones to mush. If she wasn't already half lying down she would have melted.

"I don't want to be saved from you, Daffy," he said softly. "I never did."

"Never? Not even the first time around?"

"Not even then."

"Then why— Oh, that feels wonderful." She sighed and fell silent a moment, enjoying the feel of his strong, gentle hands caressing her foot. "Why did you file for divorce?" she finally asked. It was an old issue, an old hurt.

Adam stopped caressing her foot, placing the sole against his bare, hairy chest. "I don't know exactly," he said. "I was angry. And—hurt, I guess."

"Hurt? What had I done to hurt you?"

"You left me," he stated simply. "To follow your career."

Daphne pulled herself upright and her foot slid down his stomach into the water. "But it was only going to be for a couple of months! I was coming back. You knew that!"

"I know but..." He shrugged, looking like a small boy admitting to something that embarrassed him beyond words. "I couldn't have left you, Daffy. Not for any reason. And it hurt like hell to think that you could leave me."

"Oh, Adam." Daphne leaned forward, causing little ripples of water and bubbles to lap against his chest. "Why didn't you say something? Why

did you get all macho and *order* me not to go? We could have worked something out."

He shrugged again. "Pride, I guess. If you didn't want to stay, I wasn't going to beg you to."

"But if you felt the way you say, why—" her hand slithered up his wet arm and she touched his cheek "—why did you file for divorce if you loved me?" she said.

"I had some half-baked idea that filing for divorce would bring you back to me. That if you really loved me, you'd come back and fight it." His eyes lifted to hers briefly and then dropped. "When you didn't, I thought, well...that you'd decided you didn't love me after all. That your career was more important."

"Oh, no, Adam! How could you think that? I loved you then like I love you now." She moved forward until she was kneeling between his thighs and took his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. "I loved you passionately. When you filed for divorce I thought you didn't love *me*! What else was I supposed to think? You didn't want to marry me in the first place and—"

"You were so young," Adam said. "I didn't want to push you into something you'd regret."

"Push me!" Daphne sank back on her heels, incredulity written all over her face. Her breasts swayed with the movement, drops of water glistening on their tips. "I practically had to blackmail you into marriage. How could you think you were pushing me?"

"Because I wanted it..." He licked his lips, his eyes suddenly caught by her swaying breasts. "Wanted you so

much that I *didn't* think. I just felt. And what I was feeling was driving me crazy." He looked up and grinned. "Just like it's driving me crazy now."

"But that doesn't make any sense," she said indignantly. "You didn't want to marry me because you loved me. You divorced me because you loved me. You . . . *Adam!*"

Adam had reached out, cupping his warm wet hands under her breasts. He slid his palms to her sides, his thumbs resting under the lower curve of her breasts, his fingers curling toward her back.

"Adam, I'm trying to talk to you," she said, putting her hands on his shoulders.

He shook his head. "No more talking."

"But we're not finished discussing this."

"Yes, we are. It's yesterday's news. Over. And what matters now is *now*—and the rest of our lives."

"But I need to ask you one more question."

"All right." His thumbs flickered across her nipples. "Ask. I'm listening."

"You are not. You're—" She gasped as his thumbs brushed her nipples again. "I can't talk when you do that. I can't even think when you do that."

His hands tightened, pulling her to him as he slid down into the water. "Good," he murmured.

Daphne let herself be pulled forward until she was lying on top of Adam, her breasts resting high on his chest, her bare bottom poking out of the bubbles like twin moons. But she wouldn't let him kiss her. Not yet.

"I still have one question," she insisted.

"Now?" He ran his hand along the curve of her spine, smoothing it all the way down to the swell of her buttocks.

"Yes." Daphne's voice faltered only slightly. "Now."

"But—"

"No 'buts,' Adam. That's how we got into trouble the last time. We made love instead of talking things out. I'm not going to let that happen to us again."

"You're right," Adam said, resigned. "Ask your question."

Suddenly, Daphne didn't know quite where to start. "Well, I . . . that is . . ." Surprising herself, Daphne blushed. "Well, it's just that you've been so . . . Oh, damn! This isn't going to come out right, especially after what just went on in that bedroom in there."

What had "gone on" was loving so abandoned, so intensely emotional that Daphne wondered how she could ever have thought that Adam was holding anything back. Assured of her love, he had given everything to her. And she, freed by his lack of constraint, had given him all of her.

"Come on," Adam prompted. "What have I been?"

Daphne's blush deepened. "You've been so, well, so standoffish with me these past six weeks. So distant."

She felt, rather than heard, the rumble of his laughter beneath her breasts. "Standoffish? Are you kidding? You call *this* standoffish? When I've practically ravished you every time we got within two feet of each other?" He grinned wickedly. "Not to mention what 'just went on in that bedroom.'"

Daphne's eyebrows rose. "That isn't what I mean and you know it. What I mean is," she began again, "well, why

didn't you get mad when I appeared on the evening news in Sunny's protest march? And why didn't you get upset when I left junk all over your nice clean house. And—"

Adam put a finger on her lips. "I think I get the picture," he said. "I didn't get upset for the same reason, I suspect, that you didn't get upset when I had to stay late at the hospital, or when I was called back after we'd already settled in for the night. Compromise," he stated succinctly.

"Hmm," Daphne said, digesting this. "But you were so angry when you came down to the police station to bail me out. What happened to the compromise then?"

"That wasn't anger, Daffy. Well, not all of it, anyway. It was fear. Stark terror. I thought you'd gone stomping out in a huff because I'd had to cancel our picnic."

"But I wasn't in a huff at all. I understood. Really."

"I know. I know. But that's what I thought. When Brian called to tell me that you and Sunny had been arrested that was the last straw."

"So," Daphne crowed. "You *were* mad."

"Furious," he admitted easily, his thumbs stroking the sides of her throat. "And terrified that I'd blow up and we'd end up arguing. And the last time we argued, it—" his voice got very quiet "—it was eleven years before I saw you again."

"Oh, no, Adam! It wasn't the argument that kept us apart. It was—"

"I know," he said quietly. "Intellectually, I know—knew," he corrected himself. "But I was still afraid that it would happen all over again. That, if we argued, you'd leave. When

I got home last night and you were gone I thought it *had* happened again."

"But it wasn't the arguing that drove us apart all those years ago," she said. "It was the silence. If we had really argued... really discussed things, it would have been okay, don't you see?"

"Yes, I do see. And from now on..." His hands tightened on her back. "We'll talk things out. No matter what. Agreed?"

"Agreed," she echoed softly, her eyes shining golden.

"Good!" He grinned suddenly. "Because if you didn't agree, I was fully prepared for a fight... whatever it took to get you to come back to me."

"After two brandies," Daphne reminded him.

"Actually, I had those brandies on the plane, *after* I'd decided to come after you." His palms curved over her wet silky rump. "Speaking of which, do you think I'll ever get the smell out of my clothes?"

"We won't know for a while. They won't be back from the cleaners until tomorrow."

"You mean I'm without clothes until tomorrow?"

"Uh-huh. Not a stitch." She smiled seductively.

"Don't you think we ought to take advantage of that?" he suggested, curling around the backs of her thighs.

Daphne's knees bent at the urging of his hands, coming to rest on either side of his hips. He bumped his pelvis against hers, causing water to slosh against the sides of the tub. "What do you say?" he murmured, lifting his mouth toward hers.

"I say yes," she answered, lowering her head to meet him halfway.



**TERRI
HERRINGTON**

**Lovers'
Reunion**



If only Cass and Sly really could go back to the uncomplicated years of their youth, when their love hadn't been a lie, and heal each other's heart wounds....

It was too late to change her mind.

Standing beneath the vent that blew cool air into the rich auburn hair draping her shoulders, Cassie Farrell clutched her purse with a trembling hand. She watched through the airport window as the jet rolled to a stop. Leaning her forehead against the glass, warmed by the July sun descending in the west, Cassie closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on slowing her pulse before she came face-to-face with Sly for the first time in a year.

Silly, she chided herself as she blew out a held breath and turned her back to the travelers coming from the tunnel to awaiting relatives, friends, lovers. It wasn't as if they were strangers. She'd been married to the man for eleven years. There had been a time in her life when a simple expression between them could translate a mood, when a sentence begun did not have to be finished. They had been transparent to each other once; everything hinged on her not being transparent now.

Cassie turned toward the scattering passengers. Her hand froze when, through the flurry of passing strangers, she saw him standing still, blocking the flow of traffic. His blue eyes trained on her, night-blue eyes she had drowned in more than once. For a moment she lost reality, and remembered only the bond between them in spite of their broken marriage—a bond rooted in childhood, entwined with memories of a lifetime. It seemed fit-

ting, given the circumstances of the past, that she would be here for him now, sharing a lie by choice, despite her misgivings. She wondered why Amanda, the woman he was currently involved with, had agreed to Sly's scheme. Perhaps she had counted on Sly's buried feelings, as Cassie had counted on her own.

Now Cassie realized she had underestimated the powers of the past.

Sly pushed through the crowd to where she stood. "Cass." He slid his hand under her hair to the back of her neck and pressed a kiss on her forehead.

"Sly, please." Cassie stepped back from his touch and schooled her green eyes to hide the whirlwind of emotions that was dizzying her. "We'd better hurry if we're going to make our connection. Your flight was a little late." She began walking away as she spoke, but Sly grabbed her arm and turned her around to face him.

"We've got a minute," he argued, holding her arm as if his touch had some magical power that could turn back time and make the charade more plausible. "Before we go I want you to know how much I appreciate this. It was a lot to ask, and you could have refused—"

"I did refuse," she reminded him.

He grinned, tipping her face to his. "Only three times," he said.

Cassie couldn't fight her smile, for the sparkle in his eyes was contagious.

"By the fourth time I'd have agreed to anything to get you off the phone."

Sly cocked a brow, rounding his lips and whistling under his breath. "Wish I'd known. I'd have asked for a little more."

Losing her smile at the bold remark, Cassie again stepped back. "I'm doing this for your grandmother, Sly. Not for you."

Lifting his hand in a gesture of defeat, Sly nodded, his eyes losing some of their luster. "I'll consider that a warning," he said grimly. "We'd better go."

Their connecting flight to their hometown of Langston, Louisiana, was at a gate not far from where they had met, and few words were exchanged as they reached it.

When they boarded the plane and found their seats, the stewardess approached them, smiling cheerfully. "Enjoy your flight, Mr. and Mrs. Farrell," she said. "Let me know if you need anything."

Sly watched Cassie take her seat, her eyes hardening at the innocent, understandable assumption of the flight attendant.

"Well, you do still use my name," he said, settling next to her.

"It's my name," Cassie corrected in a low placid voice. "I've used it professionally for years, and I saw no point in complicating things by changing it."

Sly rubbed at his grin. "Good point." She felt his eyes on her, burning her with nostalgic intimacy, stirring emotions she wanted buried.

The plane's engines began to turn, and Cassie felt herself rolling backward in time as the jet turned around to prepare for takeoff. Sly settled his

hand over hers, his thumb feathering the side of her hand. "Would you have come back for the class reunion if I hadn't asked you?"

She nodded. "Probably. I miss everybody, and I wanted to see them. But not like this." Her eyes were on their hands, watching almost objectively as most subjective feelings coursed through her. When the plane left the ground, she was scarcely aware of it.

After a while, he lifted her hand and studied the bare fingers. "I've been debating whether to ask you this," he said quietly, threading his fingers through hers. "But since we're trying to pretend we're still married, I was wondering if you'd mind wearing the ring?"

A long, weary sigh escaped her. They had never spoken of the ring since she'd left it on the dresser the morning she'd left.

"Lots of married couples don't wear rings."

"But the people who know us—the ones who were there when we got married and know how much those rings meant—they'll wonder."

"Let them wonder," she said.

"My grandmother will wonder," he said, as if that changed everything. And it did.

Cassie swallowed. His grandmother, the fragile old woman for whom this whole charade was taking place, would notice the absence of the rings. The simple gold bands, which had once been more precious to Cassie than diamonds or emeralds, had been passed down through generations of Sly's family. "Do you have it with you?" she asked in a whisper.

In answer, Sly reached to his inside coat pocket and pulled out the two

bands. Picking the smaller one off his palm, he held it up for her. "I had it cleaned."

A fresh feeling of loss overwhelmed Cassie. "I'm a little surprised you haven't given it to Amanda," she said, choosing her words carefully to avoid sounding bitter.

"Amanda?" he asked, a guarded frown transforming his features. "How do you know about Amanda?"

Cassie shrugged. "I see Frank from time to time when he comes through town," she said, referring to a mutual friend who lived in Chicago. "He told me about her."

Sly breathed an annoyed sigh. "Ah, yes. Frank. He keeps me pretty well informed of your love life, too."

Cassie didn't answer. Nothing Frank told him could have been significant. After all, she hadn't had any serious involvement since Sly. She only wished he could say the same. An unwelcome memory invaded her thoughts, and she closed her eyes, recalling the newspaper article Frank had brought her with a photo of Amanda announcing her engagement to Sly, less than a week ago.

"It's your ring," Sly said, cutting into her thoughts. "I wouldn't give it to anyone else." He waited, watching her face for a response. "Please wear it, Cass. It's just for a couple of days," he prodded softly. "I'll wear mine, too."

Taking a broken breath, Cassie turned back to him, knowing that she could no more deny him this than she could deny her heart another beat. "I guess if we have to do this, we should do it right."

"I think so," he whispered, still holding the ring.

She felt the tremor in his fingers as he slid the ring over hers, then held it there a moment, turning it around, studying it as if trying to recall the way it had looked before.

The flight attendant approached with the tray of drinks. Enclosing the other ring in his fist, Sly took two drinks and set them in their holders. Then, without ceremony, he slipped his own ring on.

"I still don't like it," Cassie said. "We should have told them by now. Faced up to it."

Sly peered over the rim of his glass to the seat in front of him. "We've been through this already. We agreed."

He was right, of course. They had agreed not to tell their families of their divorce. For a year they had successfully lived in different states, while their families believed they were both still living in Chicago. For a year Sly had forwarded her mail from home. For a year Cassie had called home weekly, just to make certain that her parents had no need of calling her. And on the few occasions when they had called, Sly had simply explained that she was away on a business trip and had gotten in touch with her in New York.

The deceit had been necessary. Their divorce, the first in either of their large, thriving families, would have shaken their family members, starting a campaign of meddling and manipulation aimed at getting them back together. No one would have been able to keep the breakup a secret from Sasha, the grandmother who adored both Sly and Cassie. And the disappointment might literally have killed her.

Cassie closed her eyes as painful memories of the beloved old woman's

struggle with death came back to her. Her heart attack had been a reaction to the death of the baby that Cassie had wanted for nine years and had carried for nine months. The stillbirth had been a shock, laying sorrow and grief and anger over them like a smothering shroud. After a few months the old woman had recovered, unlike Cassie and Sly, whose separate, silent anguish had torn them apart. Their marriage had died with the baby they had tried for most of their marriage to conceive.

But even after Sasha's recovery, they had agreed to keep the secret of their divorce a while longer. Sasha, whom Cassie had loved since she was five years old, had made Cassie's wedding gown. Their union had represented all that was good in the world to the old woman.

Who would have dreamed then that they would one day wind up here, like this—two separate lives, joining together to protect a lie?

Opening her eyes, Cassie saw that Sly's wistful eyes were watching her.

"I thought you were sleeping," he said.

She shook her head. "Just thinking."

"Nervous?"

She laughed. "Because we're going back to our fifteen-year class reunion pretending to be married when we're not? Nah."

A reminiscent sparkle flared in Sly's eyes, and he leaned closer to her. "If only we could really go back." He seemed to catch himself, and his smile waned. "I mean, to our youth. To the uncomplicated years of adolescence. Adulthood," he said in a dull voice.

"Every phase of it comes as a bigger surprise."

Cassie stared out the window where the night lights of Louisiana were coming into view. "No one ever gave guarantees," she muttered, more to herself than to him.

His voice came behind her ear, deep and soft like the roaring engines. "Funny how we thought we had them."

She sat back and closed her eyes. Wanting not to love him, wanting not to remember, wanting not to hurt. There had been moments over the past year when she'd desperately needed him back, when memories even stronger than pain had made the problems seem smaller. Once, after the divorce, she had even gone to him. She had learned firsthand then that there had never been guarantees. "We were wrong," she said. The lights below them, flickering like multicolored candles in a sanctuary, grew closer. "We're almost there," she whispered.

Sly looked over her shoulder. "Home," he said.

The word caused a strange swelling in her throat. Somehow, home had gotten lost in the shuffle. There hadn't been one for her since she'd given up on their marriage. And now, here they were, dragging themselves back through the past. It was insane, she thought, pretending they were still in love. It would never work.

As if sensing her fears, Sly encased her hands in his own. "It'll be all right, babe," he said, the way he had said it during her labor, before they'd known that the baby was in distress. But nothing had ever been all right again.

She didn't pull away, for she needed the strength of his touch, even if it was just for a moment.

The plane's wheels touched down on the long runway.

THEY WERE barely inside the airport when a familiar clatter of happy voices resounded around them. Genuine smiles broke across both their faces as family members swept them into the tight circle of hugs and kisses, tears and laughter, shouts and whispers.

Embracing both of her parents, Cassie closed her eyes.

A sharp, hoarse voice behind her. "Shame on both of you!"

Turning from her parents, she saw Sly's wiry little grandmother with one arm imprisoning him and the other held out for Cassie. Cassie stepped into the circle of her warmth. "Sasha!"

"Waiting all this time to come back here. You two should live here. It's your home. Now tell me about everything." She slipped her arms through theirs and started walking as the others fell into step behind them. Before either of them could speak, she narrowed her eyes and studied Cassie. "I know what *you've* been doing, Cassandra. You've been working yourself to death, hopping all over the country buying department stores."

Cassie laughed. "I don't buy department stores, Sasha. I am a buyer for a chain of department stores. And how do you know I work too hard?"

The matriarch shook a reproachful finger at Cassie. "Because you are never home when I call. Always away on business, or still at the office, or tied up in a meeting." Cassie's smile faded slightly. She had known the lie

would confront them, but she hadn't expected it so soon.

Before Cassie could reply, Sasha's attention had switched to Sly. "And you! A man who owns his own computer company ought at least to have someone he can leave the business with so he can come home and visit his old grandmother once in a while."

Sasha chattered nonstop as they made their way downstairs to pick up their luggage. When they discovered that one of Cassie's smaller bags was missing, she refused to report it for fear that everyone would notice the different points of origin. Having convinced the relatives that it would be easier to do it by phone, the two families, close friends for generations, led them to the van they had all ridden in.

"How did you get twelve people in this thing?" Sly asked while he helped Sasha in.

With giggling demonstrations, the others crowded into the small space, settling on the floor and doubling up in seats and on the sofa bed at the rear. Cassie was one of the last ones in. Climbing into the dark vehicle, she looked around for a seat and laughed. "I think I'll take a cab."

"There's always room for you," Sly said, catching her by the hips and pulling her onto his lap. His smoky-blue eyes dared her to object.

The trip was a long one, and Cassie felt desperately relieved when the van left the paved road and journeyed down the gravel street to the home where Sly had grown up, and her own childhood home less than a mile away. Cassie had lived there with him when they'd first married, and there they had stayed until both had finished college and Cassie had been offered the

job in Chicago, which had prompted their move.

One by one, the passengers climbed out of the van. As everyone started toward the house Cassie heard Sly say, "Just leave the suitcases in the van. Cass and I have a suite at the Langston Inn, so we'll be leaving after we eat."

"You'd better take that up with your grandmother," his father said.

Cassie's heart fell to her stomach, and a nagging voice in her head cried, "What next?"

"I HAVE a surprise for both of you," the old woman said in her raspy voice, hooking an arm through Cassie's while she gestured for Sly to join them. "It's upstairs, so you'll have to give me a hand."

When they'd made their way to the top of the stairs, Sasha led them down the long hall and stopped in front of the closed door of the room they'd shared when they'd first married. Sasha opened the door, smiling broadly.

Cassie and Sly caught their breath in unison when they saw what Sasha had done. The room, fairly plain and practical before, was now decorated as if awaiting a bride and groom's wedding night. "When I heard you were coming home, I—"

Cassie sank to the side of the bed and avoided meeting Sly's eyes. "Sasha, it's so... so lovely. But we're only going to be here for the weekend. And we—"

"I know, I know." Sasha cut off Cassie's words with a wave of her hand. "But I wanted to give you some incentive to come home more often. Do you like it, Sly?"

Sly was walking around the room, feeling the texture of the wallpaper, fingering the lace of the curtains that fell from the canopy and was tied back with brown bows. Wetting his lips, he studied his grandmother fondly. "You've worked so hard on this. It means a lot to us, Grandma."

"Then you'll come home more often?"

Cassie couldn't stand much more, and closing her eyes, she lowered her head to her hand.

"Of course we will," Sly said.

Cassie snapped her head up, shooting him a narrow glance. "Sasha," she said, standing up and going to the woman, ignoring Sly's laser looks. "We really do love all this, and you were so sweet to do it for us, but—"

"But it must have cost a fortune," Sly cut in.

Sasha said adamantly, "What else have I got to do with my money?"

Sly had turned Sasha around and was walking her out of the room. Grinding her teeth in rage, Cassie watched them head for the stairs, and when Sly looked back at her, she narrowed her eyes and mouthed, "I want to talk to you."

Nodding, he turned back to his grandmother and helped her down the stairs.

Standing in the open doorway, Cassie turned back to the room and blew out a long breath. It would have been a dream come true years ago, she thought. She imagined Sly and herself as newlyweds, making love on the satin bedspread, enclosed by lace draped all around the bed. But now it was only a reminder of what once had been, what had never been meant to be.

Before she'd even heard his footsteps on the stairs, Sly was beside her, staring at the bed as he leaned against the doorjamb. "Either you tell her or I will. This is getting out of hand," she said.

Sly trained his eyes on the ceiling and shook his head. "Do you know how long that wonderful little woman down there had to work to get this room like this?"

"I know, Sly," Cassie said implacably, "but it's all for a lie."

Sly closed the door and was in front of Cassie again in four swift steps. "Then you go down there and tell her it's a lie," he said. "You tell her we'd rather stay in a hotel. Then break her heart by telling her we've been divorced for a year."

Cassie covered her face and went to the bed. "Damn you, Sly Farrell!"

Sly mouthed an expletive, then went to the door, shaking his head as he opened it. "I'll be downstairs. Do what you want."

Cassie sat in the room alone for a moment. "Damn!" she muttered again, knowing she would say nothing.

*

WHEN CASSIE'S half of the family had gone home and most of Sly's had retired for the night, Sly escorted Cassie to their bedroom. The room was lit in a yellow hue from the lamp, setting an atmosphere that Cassie wanted very much to dispel. Turning on the bright overhead light, she went in.

"Why don't you relax?" Sly asked quietly as he closed the door and watched her drag her luggage to her side of the room and open it. "I swear,

I won't attack you." The half grin on his face infuriated her.

"I can take care of myself," she muttered, sifting through her suitcase for the long gown and robe she had packed. "Oh, no," she moaned. "I forgot to call about my other suitcase. It had my gown in it." She looked at Sly, catching the grin sauntering across his face before he rubbed his jaw to cover it.

"You can wear one of my T-shirts," he offered, tossing it across the bed to her.

Knowing she had nothing better in her own suitcase, she took it and went into the bathroom to change.

When she came out, Sly was lying on the bed, arms crossed behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. He had changed, too, and was now dressed only in a pair of blue shorts. Trying not to notice the hard curves of his biceps and the broad slashes of muscle across his chest, Cassie tugged at the T-shirt, making sure it at least covered her underwear, though she knew her thighs were completely exposed.

"Couldn't you wear a little more than that?" she asked, annoyance clear in her voice.

Sly pulled up to a sitting position, a less-than-innocent smile glittering in his sapphire eyes. "This is what I sleep in."

"Just this once?" she pressed.

"Afraid you can't control yourself?" he asked, his eyes boring into her for a sign of the truth.

"Don't be ridiculous," she quipped. "I just don't think we should be so personal with each other."

In a deep rumble, he said, "Pretty lady, you should know better than to stand in nothing but bikini panties and

your husband's T-shirt and talk about being too personal. Isn't 'intimate' more the word you're looking for?"

"You're not my husband," Cassie said, crossing her arms high to cover the points that gave away her arousal.

"I'll give you that one." His grin faded slowly.

She rushed back into the bathroom and closed the door. The cold ceramic tile beneath her feet lent a feeling of reality to a day that had resembled something out of a bad dream.

Biting her lip, she fought with the memory of a time a few months ago, when she had needed Sly more than she ever had. When she had admitted to herself that she had never stopped loving him. She recalled the careful way she had packed for her trip to Chicago to see him, how she had hoped to surprise him. But the surprise had been hers.

She had used her key to get in. Soft music had been the first clue, followed by the two empty wine glasses on the coffee table. A black high-heeled shoe caught her attention at the bottom of the stairs, and another lay on its side halfway up, as if it had fallen that way when the woman had been carried to bed.

Feeling foolish, Cassie had quietly backed out of the house and driven her rental car back to the airport. Had she thought he would be pining away for her all that time? Had she believed he'd be waiting for her?

From that moment on she had decided that their relationship was over for good.

Taking a deep breath, Cassie opened the door again and saw that Sly had turned off the light. The satin covers were pulled to his waist, and his eyes

were closed. Without saying a word, she went to her side of the bed and slipped between the sheets.

His broad chest heaved with a deep sigh that seemed to rip out of him, and he said, "Cass, I know it's an ordeal for you, but I'm really glad to have you here with me this weekend. I've missed you."

Cassie couldn't answer. The raw statement was so unexpected, so naked, that it left her stunned. She missed him, too. A fresh torturing memory tugged at her heart, a memory of his curling up in the bend of her body while they slept, his hand pressed against the full abdomen that had carried their child. Turning away from him, she curled into herself, arms around her waist, and fought the tears of latent grief and aching regret.

WHEN SHE awoke the following morning to find herself trapped in the curve of his powerful arm, the palm of his hand pressed against her bare rib cage, their legs entangled, and her head resting on the crisp, curling hair of his chest, she tried to slip out of his hold without waking him. His arms only tightened, and a faint, slow grin gave infuriating life to his otherwise dormant features.

"You've got a lot of nerve," Cassie mumbled, jerking out of Sly's grasp and sliding to the opposite edge of the bed.

Sly peered at her through the narrow half-moons of his eyes. "Guess you just woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

"You better believe I woke up on the wrong side of the bed! *Your* side, you—"

"Wait a minute!" Sly said, sitting up and reaching for her shoulders. "Before you go accusing me of something that wasn't my fault, you'd better get your facts straight."

Cassie shook off his hands and stormed around the bed to the bathroom. Turning on the water, she leaned over the sink and splashed a cold handful in her face, mentally washing out the feelings that had overcome her when she'd awakened in Sly's arms.

Hadn't she known that coming home with Sly would ruin her? Hadn't she known that her resistance would only awaken competitiveness in him? She was a woman, an attractive one. And he was a man who had spent much of the past year being Chicago's most available bachelor. What hurt was not that he had exposed her vulnerability, but that it didn't matter to him. She was just another playmate. Another challenge. She wondered if he often stepped out on Amanda.

The door thudded open and Cassie jumped as Sly came in, his face taut. "Get out of here!" She clipped the words, stepping back.

"Cass, I didn't do anything. You came to *me* last night. You were asleep and you just—"

Cassie turned her back to Sly and clenched her fists. "So you took advantage of it!"

"All I did was hold you," he said in a broken voice.

"You shouldn't have," she said, forcing the emotion from her face and turning back to him. "You had no business—"

"You're my wife," he said with slow emphasis.

"I'm not your wife!" she retorted. "I'm a part of your past and that's all."

He stood staring at her as if the mere act would crumble the barrier she had constructed between them. Silence rang a deafening peal. She saw his Adam's apple bob, but he offered no other clues to his thoughts. Finally, without cutting the tension, he stepped away from the bathroom and closed the door.

Pain greater than humiliation or loneliness coursed through her, an inexplicable grief that flushed her veins at times when she was least equipped to deal with it. Sweeping her hands through tangled hair, she squeezed her eyes shut and reminded herself how strong she was, how strong she had become in the past few months. She had survived these stirrings before, and she would get through them now. All she had to do was not feel, not think. All she had to do was focus on something else.

Hurrying out of the bathroom, she grabbed a pair of shorts and a shirt and went back in to put them on. When she came out, she went to the bed table for her hairbrush, but Sly caught her hand. He gazed into her eyes. "I'm sorry I upset you, Cass," he said in a voice that soothed and grieved her at the same time. "I didn't mean to."

"I'm okay," she said hurriedly. "I never have been easy to get along with before my first cup of coffee." The admission was the closest she could come to an apology for her harsh words, without exposing all the regret she had tried so hard to hide. "I'm going down to see if there's any coffee perking."

She disengaged her hand, but his hovered in the air for a moment before closing and dropping in a fist on the mattress. "I'll see you downstairs," she muttered, then left the room to rush down the stairs.

Pushing through the swinging kitchen door, Cassie saw Sasha, clothed in a thick robe that made her tiny frame look even more fragile, standing before the oven, peering through the window at the homemade biscuits that were rising to a golden brown.

"Smells wonderful," Cassie said when the old woman saw her.

"Come in here and sit down," Sasha said with her shoulders raised in excitement. "You can have first pick. Pour yourself some coffee and I'll get the jam." Sasha's eyes followed Cassie as she poured her coffee, then sat down at the long table.

Cassie sipped at her coffee and glanced hungrily toward the oven.

"Oh, all right. They're probably ready by now, anyway," Sasha said on a laugh, taking the hot pan from the oven.

Sasha set a plate in front of Cassie and opened a jar of strawberry jam. She laughed again, deepening the lines that mapped her face.

"What's so funny?" Sly asked from the doorway.

Cassie's smile faded, and she glanced at Sly. He leaned against the jamb holding the swinging door open. She took a gulp of her coffee.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked Cassie, his eyes making contact with hers.

"Not at all," Cassie answered as politely as possible.

Sasha poured Sly a cup of coffee, then refilled Cassie's cup. "You have no idea how happy I am to have you two here. You know I remember exactly when you two fell in love? Bet you don't even remember, do you?"

"Well, uh—"

"You were fourteen, Sly, and it was right before Cassie's fourteenth birthday. Up till then you'd been best friends, wrestling, playing tricks on each other. I remember you found her a pearl barrette for her hair, and you wrapped it up to give it to her for her birthday."

The memory came back from dusty corners of Cassie's mind, setting her heart fluttering. He had taken her into the barn and asked if he could give her that present early, because he didn't want her opening it in front of everyone else. She remembered the tremor in her fingers as she'd untied the bow and carefully torn the paper off...and the way he fidgeted. Her heart had threatened to fly out of her chest when she opened the box.

"Cassie, you came out of that barn with that barrette in your hair, and Sly was following you with the proudest smile on his face I ever saw."

She had looked up into his eyes and thanked him, feeling the pink blush of alien feeling on her cheeks, reflecting the way his neck reddened and the strange quiver of his lips when he shrugged and tried to smile. He had kissed her then, a soft, innocent kiss that came as a complete surprise to them both. Neither had known what to do after that threshold had been crossed. She had felt so awkward. So wonderful.

"After that," Sasha said with a sparkling of her dark eyes as she set-

tled down again, "Sly was a holy terror to live with. Moody, temperamental. And you two went out of your way to keep from being alone with each other." Sasha sighed. "I knew you had fallen in love."

Cassie glanced across the table at Sly and saw that he was caught in his own memories. Their eyes made momentary contact again.

"We had no idea anyone else knew, Grandma," Sly said, smiling a wistful, secretive smile at Cassie, as if they alone knew the extent of the emotions they had cultivated in each other. The smile was more than Cassie could bear. The lie was more than she could stand. Her eyes tore from his.

"It couldn't have been more obvious," the old woman said.

Before Cassie could think of a change of subject Sly's brother burst through the door. The room came to life as each family member awoke and joined them at the table. Cassie helped cook breakfast, trying to ignore the heaviness weighing on her heart. Conversation at the table, though perfectly natural to everyone else, seemed stiff and stilted to Cassie. Inevitably the subject continued to drift around to herself and Sly. Sly answered all the questions so that it would have convinced even her that they were still as happy as ever.

She busied herself loading the dishwasher, hoping the activity would keep her from having to participate in any more lies concerning her and Sly. But no sooner had the last plate been cleared from the table than Sly's father called her to follow him outside.

"Don't try to get out of it," he told Sly who was waiting outside for her. "We haven't had pictures of you two

in about five years. Just grin and bear it."

Cassie didn't know how much more she could take. "Jasper, I can't. Really. I look awful, and I need to shower."

"You look fine," Jasper declared. "I don't plan to send this in to *Cosmopolitan*, anyway. Just a few shots of my firstborn and his bride."

Breathing back her frustration, Cassie put her hands in her pockets and went to stand beside Sly, who was studying the gravel at his feet. "I don't want to do this, Sly," Cassie whispered.

"I know you don't," he said, turning to look over her shoulder so his father couldn't hear his words. "But it's important to him." Sly set his eyes on something far beyond the pasture spread behind them. "Cass, I don't think it'll kill you to pretend you like me for a few minutes. I'm sorry if I'm cramping your style this weekend, but we didn't part enemies last year, if I remember right." He glanced back at his father, who had decided his film was tangled inside the camera and was busy pulling it back out. "If you want to know the truth, I'm not quite sure what you'd call that friendly, mature way we separated. But if that wasn't a farce I don't understand why this is."

Cassie struggled to swallow the lump that was blocking her throat. "How would you have preferred it? It was what we both wanted."

"Yeah," Sly said on a dull laugh. "No reason for any fireworks, right? Just a signature, a quick trip to Mexico and a goodbye."

"Did you want fireworks?"

Sly laughed again and glanced after his father, who had disappeared into

the house for another camera. "It might have helped. God knows there were moments when I wanted to scream at you. But when that wall goes up, no one can get to you."

Cassie bit her lip and kicked at a rock. "Right. It was all my fault."

"I didn't say that, Cass," he said. "It's just that I've never been able to figure out where either of us went wrong."

"Maybe you shouldn't dwell on it," she said quietly. "Maybe you should just put it behind you and not think about it."

"Like you do?"

Cassie's eyes darted up, and she saw the anxiety that was etched between his brows. She didn't answer, for she knew she had been unsuccessful at putting it behind herself. She had tried. God knew, she had tried.

The screen door slammed, and Jasper came out with a new camera. "Come on, you two. You look like a couple of strangers."

Sly set his arm on her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. Awkwardly, stiffly, they stood smiling at the camera.

"If you think I plan to waste my film on a shot like that, you're sadly mistaken," Jasper said with exasperation.

Sly looked down at Cassie, dread in his eyes. "Sorry, Cass," he whispered. Cassie forced a smile and looked toward the door as some of the others came outside to watch. At the kitchen window stood Sasha, watching with an expressionless gaze.

"Sasha's watching," Cassie said, sliding her arms around Sly's waist and leaning her head against his chest. Sly's arms folded around her, and he pulled

her more tightly against him. The camera snapped.

"More, more!" Sly's brother, Sammy, chided from the steps. "Let's see some action!"

"How about a kiss?" Jasper shouted, camera to his eye.

"Sure, Dad," Sly teased, letting Cassie go and heading for his father.

"Not me, you big idiot, *her!*"

He turned to Cassie, pulled her theatrically against him, and kissed her. At first she resisted, but his arms only circled more firmly around her. Coaxing her lips open, he invaded the warmth of her mouth, his tongue laced with fire. Her hands climbed his chest to brush across the unshaven roughness of his jaw, and through the midnight silk of his hair. She wanted more, but knew she would never let herself indulge. His lips swept off hers and trailed to the corner of her mouth before he lifted his head.

"Way to go!" Sammy hooted above the others.

Sly's arms loosened, but he didn't let her go. Reluctantly, Cassie dropped her hands and slid them back into her pockets, trying to grin as if the scene had cost her nothing. Sly gave a slight bow, smiling like an actor who'd just gotten a standing ovation. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked Cassie in a husky whisper against her head.

"How much longer do we have to do this?" she asked, for she knew any admission of enjoyment at all would do her in.

Then, as if she'd never found herself in his arms before, she stiffened and stepped away. The group broke up and began to disperse. Sly's arms tightened around her again. His breath

came heavy against her ear. "You did good, Cass."

Suddenly she didn't know if she could stand going up to that room alone with him. Worse, she thought, she didn't know if she could stand *not* going up to that room alone with him. "Don't you think we overdid it a little?" she asked in a cool voice as she slipped away from him, her rigid body warning him off.

"Just gave them what they wanted."

He always did, she thought. "I have to go in now," she said, leaving him standing alone as she went into the house.

THE BATHROOM adjoining their bedroom was damp with the steam from Sly's shower, and his scent lingered in the air. A wet towel hung over the shower bar, and of its own accord, Cassie's hand went up to touch it. The familiarity of the sensations guiding her was frightening. She had forced herself to put him out of her mind for a year, clinging to the hurt and the bitterness as if they could save her from memory. It was always a familiar moment like this that ambushed her. It came in different forms. One day a ticket stub in an old purse that reminded her of a play they'd seen together. Another day it would be an old song. More often it presented itself as a need. She would be lonely. She would be down. And in the depths of her heart she would feel as if she'd thrown away life itself. With every fiber of her being, she would miss Sly.

Yet now she was with him, and she knew that all she had to do was go downstairs and approach him and he would be hers while they shared this weekend. But the divorce would still be

a barrier between them, and so would his love for Amanda. And so would the things he had done and those she had not done when their marriage was breathing its last breaths. The baby would not come back just because they reunited, and the pain would not be lessened simply because he held her again. It would hurt more, for it would be like robbing the tragic event of its significance. They could never feel the same about their loss. She would never forget, and he would never know the same grief she knew.

The pounding warmth of the water melted the ice around Cassie and drew all her emotions to the surface. How much more of him could she take? she wondered.

Tears welled in her eyes and ran down her face to battle the drops of water from the shower. Once they started, they kept coming, tearing great chunks from her heart. Shaking with the weight of the tears, she hugged her arms across her chest.

Where had they lost it? she wondered. They had been so happy, so in love, but one morning she had awakened filled with numbness and emptiness. The numbness had seemed comforting after the baby's death, so she had clung to it, letting it dictate her life for months afterward. But the numbness had cost her Sly. And even that loss had seemed fitting in the context of her life at the time.

But what about now? She wanted him now, desired him with more fervor than she ever had. Cassie didn't have the luxury of numbness anymore.

Taking a final deep, sobbing breath, Cassie turned off the water.

Opening the bathroom door, she felt the cool air from the air conditioner sweep the steam off her shoulders. She raked her fingernails through the thick wet mass of hair. Her heart and mind and hands froze when she saw Sly. She clutched the top of her towel.

His eyes dropped to the damp sheen of her shoulders and the column of her neck and made their slow, sweeping journey across the curve of her breasts covered by the towel. A paralyzing moment passed as their eyes locked, silently revealing every naked thought that passed between them.

"I'll get dressed in the bathroom," she whispered from deep in her throat.

"Don't," he said, taking her wrist with his hand. He stared at her for an explosive moment. She could see the strain on his face, feel it in the heat radiating from him. Wetting his lips, he took her by the shoulders, his hands trembling against her bare skin. On a swallow, he said, "God, Cass. Don't you know you're driving me crazy?" He seemed to inch closer until there was no distance at all between them.

"I'm not trying to," she whispered.

"You don't have to try," he replied. "All you have to do is stand there, and I feel—"

Her head rolled back as he spoke, the offering of her lips cutting off his words. His lips closed on hers, coaxing her to join in the madness. She felt her hands scaling the muscles of his chest. His fingers feathered up her smooth thigh, sparking trembling energy in her that told her she had no choice but to love him.

But he stopped, pulled away and gazed into her eyes, his breathing deep and rapid. "You don't know what

you're doing to me, Cass," he whispered. "Be sure, before—"

She touched his lips with her fingertip to silence him, and he took it in a trembling hand and pressed it against his face, gazing at her with fierce yearning. With his eyes studying hers for a hint of resistance, he set her hand on his stomach and slid it slowly upward, through the soft, curling mass of hair, across the nipple sharp with arousal, and stopped over his heart. He swallowed, and she lowered her hand to his waist.

Sliding his shirt up his chest, she stepped toward him until the peaked nipples of her breasts crushed against his chest. Keeping her green eyes on his, she led him to the bed and pulled the shirt over each arm and slid it over his head. She ventured toward his zipper, slowly pulled it down, holding her breath. He pulled her against him then, kissing her with a ravaging force that made her legs feel boneless as they sank to the bed.

His mouth devastated her as he bit his way down her neck and trailed to a nipple, licking hot flames across it. He played her with the strength and control that had haunted her dreams.

Suddenly, when she thought she could wait no longer, he filled her. He carried her to the galaxy where ecstasy reigns and made her moan his name in a distant voice that floated into eternity.

The weight of his body still on hers, he gazed into her eyes. Suddenly reality overwhelmed Cassie as she saw the tenderness on his face. Without warning, tears rolled down her cheek.

His thumb stroked the damp path of the tears. "What?" he whispered. New lines creased between Sly's brows and

around the outer corners of his eyes.

"Tell me," he entreated.

"Just hold me," she whispered.

"Don't let me go just yet."

"I never want to let you go," he whispered, pushing her hair back, the slow rhythm of his breathing pressing his stomach into hers.

Pulling out from under him, Cassie sat up on the bed and picked up the towel, draping it around her nakedness again. "We're not married anymore, Sly. We shouldn't have let it go that far."

Sly sat up and put a warm hand on each of her shoulders. "I've never been able to think of you as anything but my wife."

Cassie took a deep breath and stood up. "I'd be a fool to think of you as my husband," she said stiffly. "I'm not up to that kind of pain. You have sexual needs that aren't accustomed to going unsated. We filled needs for each other, and..."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked, rising and snatching his shorts off the floor.

"It's no secret that you're engaged, or that your love life has been vigorous between commitments—"

"You must be kidding."

"I'm not kidding, Sly. I know all about you. I just want to make it clear that I have no intention of being another notch in your belt."

"Lady, you were the *only* notch for the first thirty-two years of my life. And frankly, I'm surprised that you had time to keep up with mine in light of your own. I know all about that male model you went to Paris with, and I know about the lawyer and the C.P.A. and the journalist."

Cassie was stunned. None of those dates had gone farther than the front door of her apartment. She hadn't wanted to get involved with any of them. "How did you know about those?"

"The same way you know about me, I suspect. Frank." Sly stood firmly facing her, his lips an angry slash across his face, his feet slightly apart. "I'm just going by the information I was given."

"Then your information was wrong! I've slept with one man in my life, Sly! One man! Figure that one out."

Sly brought his hands to his hips and glanced away as if turning her words over in his mind. "Then maybe your information was wrong, too."

The words were almost a denial and sent Cassie into a rage. "I might have questioned it—" her words grated through clenched teeth "—if I hadn't stumbled on it firsthand."

Sly's face contorted further as he struggled to grasp her meaning. "Firsthand? How? Do you mean that newspaper article last week?"

"No. I mean *firsthand*," she retorted, her words springing to life like the bonfire that resulted from a careless match. "I came back to you, Sly. A few months ago, after the divorce, I came back to you! You never knew it because you were busy upstairs—in our bedroom!"

Sly's anger fell from him like something tangible, and his eyes grew round and dull. "You came back? Why didn't you—?"

"It seemed a little awkward to walk in and say hello, under the circumstances." She bit the words out. "I decided, instead, to go back to New York and put our life completely behind me."

Amanda must be a fool to get tied up with you!" Fresh tears filled her eyes, stinging tears that she slapped away in defiance. Jerking out a drawer, she grabbed her clothes and stormed toward the bathroom to dress in private. "And I guess that just makes me an idiot, too. At least before I was your wife. Now I'm just one more in a long string of lovers!"

"Cassie!" he shouted as the door slammed in his face.

Cassie dressed in thirty seconds. When she opened the door, her tears had stopped. He was leaning against the doorframe, covering his brow with his hand. "Cass, I never knew you wanted—"

"It doesn't matter," she said, going to the closet and pulling out the dress she had brought to wear that evening to the reunion dance. "You get married again, go on with your life. None of it matters anymore."

"Where are you going?" he asked when she opened the door. "We need to talk about this."

"Why? What difference will it make?" She looked down at the dress draped over her arm, the shoes hanging from her fingers. "I need to spend some time with my family while I'm here," she said, avoiding meeting his pleading, sorrowful eyes. "I'll walk over and you can pick me up there tonight."

For the first time she realized that it was not for Sasha that she had kept the divorce a secret. It was for herself, for in clinging to the lie she had, in a sense, been able to hold on to Sly and to the best part of herself.

Heaving a deep breath, Cassie wiped the dampness off her face and went down the stairs. But no sooner had she

started across the hollow wooden floor of the living room than a deep, raspy voice summoned her from Sasha's room. "Come here and sit down," Sasha ordered, emphasizing her request with her shaking hands. "I heard angry voices upstairs," she said bluntly as Cassie obeyed. "You and Sly were fighting."

Cassie tried to smile. "We weren't fighting, Sasha."

"I may be old," Sasha argued on a huff of breath, "but I'm not deaf nor stupid."

Cassie sank back defeatedly. "We had a little disagreement. It's over now, though. Nothing serious."

"Nothing serious," she mimicked in an unflattering voice. "I see what's going on with you and Sly. You can't talk to each other," Sasha said gruffly. "You're not comfortable with each other."

"We are," Cassie started to argue, but Sasha nipped her words.

"It's the baby, isn't it?" she asked, the lines deepening by degrees on her face.

Cassie swallowed. "No," she whispered.

"Yes," Sasha said. "Don't deny it to yourself, girl! I'm not so old that I can't remember how it feels to lose a child."

Cassie's troubled, moist eyes shot up to meet Sasha's misty gray ones. "You . . . you lost a child?"

The tremor in Sasha's face and hands seemed accelerated, but her voice was steady as she spoke. "I lost my firstborn in a flu epidemic," Sasha said, holding Cassie's eyes. "It never stops hurting. But you have your husband, Cassie. You've shared a loss that no one else will ever understand."

Grief choked Cassie, and she covered her face with a hand. "If you've been through it, then you know. I love you, Sasha, but I can't—"

"Can't talk about it," Sasha said more gently. "If you guard it like a treasure you think you'll somehow be making up for it. Whatever you did wrong, whatever you didn't do, whatever Sly may have done—"

"I don't blame Sly for Laura's death," she blurted, realizing it was the first time she had used the baby's name.

"Then tell him," Sasha urged. "Grieve, cry, share it with your husband before it ruins you. And then go on with your life, for God's sake. Your husband needs you, child. It was his baby, too. He has his own demons."

Cassie's hand slid to her twisted mouth, and she gazed at the beloved old woman through a blur of tears. "It wasn't the same for him," she said. "For so many years while we were trying to conceive, the baby was just an idea, a dream. And when she died, it was no more than the death of an idea to him."

"How can you say that?" Sasha asked, slamming a frail hand onto her mattress. "You young people are so exhausting," she hissed. "Life is too precious to waste on selfish sorrows. It isn't your sorrow alone." Letting out a heavy sigh, Sasha closed her eyes.

"I'll go now and let you sleep," Cassie said quietly, feeling relieved and deprived at the same time, as if her hour in the psychiatrist's office were up. When Sasha didn't answer, she left the room, closing the door behind her.

*

THE MILE-LONG walk to her parents' house gave Cassie ample time to recapture the fragile numbness that had helped her survive the worst periods of her life. After several hours with her family, and several glasses of her father's homemade wine, her spirits even began to lighten. She sat on the front porch with her parents, her oldest brother, Jack, and her younger sister, Barbara. Three of her nieces, who lived nearby, played in an inflated swimming pool in the front yard, splashing and dunking each other, while the two nephews engaged in a garden hose battle.

"I ran into D.H. in town," Jack leaned his head back and let out a boisterous laugh. "Old Sly still have a sore spot when it comes to D.H. and you?"

Exasperation colored Cassie's cheeks. "There was never a 'D.H. and me.'"

"Didn't you go out with him once?" Barbara asked.

Cassie nodded. "When Sly and I broke up once for a few weeks, I did. But it never meant much."

"Sly never forgot it," Jack said on a laugh. "Kept him on his toes for years."

Cassie's mother let out a long sigh. "Yes, but Cassie and Sly always had eyes for each other. I used to worry, when they were so young, that they didn't go out with other people."

"Hell," her father chimed in. "When you two announced that you were getting married you were just kids—"

"They were twenty-one," Barbara cut in in defense of her sister and Sly.

"I'll admit I was a little shaken up. I knew you were head over heels for each other, but I didn't know it would last. Once again, I was wrong."

Cassie let her eyes drift out over the yard to the children playing. Even here, in the solace of her childhood home, she could not escape Sly. If she told them they had divorced, would they leave his name out of their conversations?

Excusing herself, Cassie went into the cool house and walked from room to room. It didn't seem like home anymore. It was smaller and older. The house she had shared with Sly had been home for her. That had been her life.

Walking into the bedroom she had long ago given up to Barbara, Cassie sat on the bed and stared at a chip in the paint on the wall. Sly had asked her if she had regrets. Her regrets were based on the way she had let her marriage die with the baby. The way she had held in her pain, while she had desperately needed to lash out at Sly for accepting that stillbirth with such strength. How had he survived that loss unscathed? How had he been able to act as if nothing had changed?

The telephone rang, startling Cassie out of her reverie. Someone downstairs answered it, then called up, "Cassie! It's Sly!"

Cassie reached carefully for the phone as if it were a live, threatening being. Sly's soft voice made her heart miss a beat. "Cass? Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine." She cleared her throat.

"I...I talked to Sasha," he said. "She knows things aren't right between us, though."

"I know. She told me."

Sly spoke again. "She got me thinking. I've made mistakes, Cass. Maybe I've ruined things for good."

"It takes two people to ruin a marriage," Cassie said quietly.

"I never wanted to let you go," Sly said, his voice cracking with the admission. "If I had known for a minute that you wanted to come back, I never would have... everything would have been different."

"Maybe it's best that everything turned out the way it did," Cassie said without conviction.

"I don't believe that," he whispered. "I hope you don't believe it, either."

Cassie couldn't answer. Already a tear was running down her face. She had cried more today than she had in her entire life.

"I'll pick you up at seven," he said in a dejected voice.

"Okay," Cassie said, nodding her head as if he could see her. "I'll see you then."

"Cass?" His voice came in a whisper, just before she started to put the phone in its cradle.

"Yes?"

"I'm still in love with you."

Moments passed before she could respond to the startling statement, and before she had time to speak, a click told her Sly was gone.

Hadn't she known deep down that he still cared? Maybe Sasha was right. Maybe Sly did need her. Maybe she had buried herself with the baby, so deeply that only now could she let herself come back and feel those emotions she'd held at bay for so long. She had come out of that cave for a short while today when she had loved Sly. The light of his passion had been bril-

liant, if blinding, and now the shadows that had become her reality would never be sufficient again.

Her eyes drifted back to the telephone. "He still loves me," she murmured.

CASSIE FOUND that she was nervous. You'd think she was getting ready for the senior prom.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror on Barbara's closet door, she studied her image, trying to see herself from Sly's point of view. Her strapless dress was an original she had found on a buying trip in Paris, and she had spent a fortune on it, not knowing where she would ever wear it. The ivory fabric was soft and clingy. The gathering on one side of the waist pulled the dress tight around her flat stomach, and the knee-length, uneven skirt was slit to the gathering at the upper thigh in a cascade of ruffles, giving the illusion that nothing held it together at all.

She touched perfume to the base of her ears and on each wrist, and finally added a dot to the cleavage that hinted at the bare breasts underneath.

A car engine sounded in the gravel driveway outside, and holding her breath, she hurried out of the bedroom and into the living room where her family was assembled.

The doorbell rang. Taking another nervous breath, she opened the door.

Sly was at his best. His custom-tailored coat was pulled back above his wrists, revealing the white shirt that darkened his tan and deepened the blue of his eyes.

"Wow," he breathed out. His smile wavered and his eyes darted to the family standing behind her. "That

dress didn't look that way on the hanger." The explanation seemed as necessary to her as it did to him, for no one would understand their enchanted scrutiny of each other.

After the necessary goodbyes to her family, Sly escorted Cassie to the car. "You look so beautiful," he said softly, the evening dusk darkening his features. His kiss was gentle, inspiring more, promising later.

The drive to the Langston Inn, in whose ballroom the party was to take place, was fraught with an eloquent silence that added to the fantasy Cassie was finally letting herself live.

HARDLY ANYONE in the class of one hundred fifty graduates had missed the dance. The camaraderie with old friends drew Cassie closer to Sly, for he had always been beside her when these people had been part of her life.

On the dance floor Sly pulled her against him. His freshly shaven jaw brushed against her cheek. "I meant what I said on the phone today." His face was serious; his eyes were intense. "I do love you, Cassie. I've always loved you."

She dropped her eyes to the knot in his tie, but he used his lips to coax her face back to his.

"I've hurt you, and you've hurt me. But we can make up for it. Cass, I have no intention of marrying Amanda."

Cassie caught her breath. "But... I saw the article last week. Your engagement..."

"It was a ploy, Cass," he said earnestly. "She didn't want me to come here with you, because she knew I had never gotten over you. She thought that announcement would tie me to her

and keep me from coming. It didn't work."

Cassie stared up into his face. "But there must have been some discussion of marriage," Cassie said, "or she never would have expected to get away with it."

He nodded. "There was some. I was trying to go on with my life, Cass. But I couldn't forget you, no matter what I did." He drew her closer, his voice soft against her ear as he clung to her. "Those other women... they were substitutes. At the time it seemed the only way to keep my sanity. And the only way to keep from running after you and begging you to come back."

"That wouldn't have worked, either," Cassie admitted. "I needed healing time."

"So did I," he said. "Only I found myself with nothing, and the wounds were deeper than I was."

She laid her head on his shoulder, accepting the comfort of his hands sliding up her back.

"I want you back, Cass," he whispered hoarsely in her ear, his face cradled against her hair. "That's why I wanted us to come home together this weekend. I thought I might be able to persuade you..."

Cassie's head shot up.

"Don't be angry," he said. "It was my last chance. Cass, if Laura had lived, we would never have split up."

The way he used the baby's name moved her. Cassie buried her face in his lapel to hide her pain.

"Somehow you blamed me for the baby's death, didn't you?"

She found herself unable to answer. He wiped her tears, but he did nothing for the half-moons that were welling in his own eyes. He opened his mouth to

speak, but the music ended and a drumroll cut him off.

"Is everybody having fun?" a voice said through the PA system. Jerry, the class's vice-president and head of the reunion committee, was answered with a chorus of cheers. "It's time to give out the awards!"

Cassie tried to concentrate on the silly awards being given out, a training bra for "Least Changed," a sex manual for "Newliest Wed," a sperm-shaped bank for "Mother Having Most Children in Least Amount of Time." But her eyes kept drifting to Sly, who stared at the podium as if he didn't see a thing. Amidst cheers and boos, Jerry continued.

"The next one is for 'Longest Married Couple.' No one has to guess who that is," he said cheerfully. "It's Sly and Cassie Farrell!"

Cassie caught her breath, wanting only to escape the tension between them and the lie that now the whole class was participating in. Sly grabbed her arm to stop her, but Cassie ran from the room.

Outside, standing against the side of the building, she wept into her hands. Sly took her in his arms, holding her close as he escorted her back into the lobby. "We need to talk. How about if I find a place where we can be alone?"

She nodded, keeping her head bowed so that no one could see her face as she went with him to the registration desk of the hotel. "I believe I still have a reservation here for Mr. and Mrs. Sly Farrell," he told the clerk.

When he'd gotten the key, he took her in the elevator to the designated floor and found the room.

Taking her hands, he sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her onto

his lap. "I love you, Cassie. I want you to talk to me."

New tears squeezed out of her closed eyes, and she buried her face in his collar. "Talking won't change things."

"I have to know." His voice was soft, pleading. "Did you blame me for the baby's death?"

Cassie covered her face with shaking hands. "No. Not for the death. For after it." Cassie couldn't hold back the hostility and misery washing over her. "You didn't care. It didn't matter. You were happy, and cheerful, and—"

"Like hell!" Trembling hands took Cassie by the shoulders. "Is that what you thought? You thought I didn't care that the baby I'd been anticipating for years had died? You thought I forgot about it just like that?"

Cassie swallowed and looked him in the eye. "The next morning, you told me that you'd packed up all the baby's things. You said it must have been for the best that she died. You looked like hell, and you told me that you had a hangover from the night before. A hangover! Our baby had died, and the only pain you had was from a hangover."

Anger twisted Sly's face. He looked almost dangerous. "You want to know what I did the night Laura died? I went home and went in the baby's room and saw how carefully you had prepared everything before you went to the hospital. You had even laid out the pink and blue outfits on the crib side, and I was supposed to bring the right one to the hospital after the baby was born. Only I knew that our child would wear that homecoming dress to her grave! I sat down in the rocking chair in the baby's room and cried until I was sick. And then I packed up everything so

you would be spared that added suffering when you got home!"

Cassie felt the world she'd known for over a year slipping from under her.

"I told you I had a hangover because I didn't want you to know how torn up I was. I was terrified that you'd somehow blame yourself for the stillbirth. So I tried to distract you. But from the moment we knew the baby was dead, no one could reach you. You built a wall around yourself, and I thought I just had to give you time, let you deal with it in your own way. But the next thing I knew you were flying off to Mexico for a divorce."

It seemed as if Cassie were seeing her life played before her on a gigantic screen, all her mistakes and misconceptions in living color. "I needed you, Sly," she whispered. "But I didn't think I could share that grief with you when you didn't feel it. I thought—"

Sly's anger drained from his face. "Baby, you thought wrong. I suffered. Twice as much as was necessary, because I lost you, too. I wound up with nothing."

Cassie pulled herself off the bed and went to the window. Sly stood up and slid his arms around her waist, his eyes penetrating her very soul.

"We've wasted so much," she whispered.

"We can get it back," he promised.

Their eyes embraced, and Cassie knew that the love she saw in those cerulean depths was the only truth that mattered. As his lips lowered to hers, their souls reunited in bold defiance of the lies that had kept them apart.

WHEN THEIR passion was spent, they slept like trusting children in each other's arms.

er's arms, then woke as the promise of morning painted the room in pink-orange hues. Cassie woke to Sly's smiling eyes.

"Will you marry me, Cass? Give us another chance. Start over with me."

His eyes, blue as a clear morning sky, stopped her heart and told her it would never beat again without the hard, steady rhythm of his own.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'll marry you again."

His eyes became two round sapphires glistening with the mist of joy and relief. "It'll be better this time, Cass. You'll see. No more mistakes. No more disappointments. And we can start trying to have a family again. A man isn't complete without his own children."

Cassie's smile ebbed. She felt the anxiety of trying for years to conceive.

"I'll go to New York with you today, and we'll pack your things," Sly said.

Nothing reached her mind except for the miserable, frightening thought of pregnancy. *Pregnancy*. Nine months of hope that ended in misery and tragedy.

"Cass? Did I say something wrong?"

The barriers Sly had broken down overnight reemerged around her. "It's just...I don't know if I can move that quickly." She couldn't meet his eyes. "They've gotten used to having me in New York." Her statement had a dull note of finality. "It'll take time to settle things there."

"How much time?"

Cassie pulled away from him. "A few months. I'm not sure—"

"Months! We've wasted a whole year. Cass, answer me! Are you going to marry me or not?"

She couldn't answer. She wanted to reach out to him, share her fears. But her sanity hinged on avoiding those fears at any cost.

"So," he said after several moments of silence. "I guess that's your answer. Just like that, you changed your mind." He stared at her for a moment, then straightened and moved to the dresser. Slowly, mechanically, Sly gathered his wallet and keys. He turned back to Cassie, his unshaven face taut and expressionless. "Come on," he said in a flat, wooden monotone. "We both have a plane to catch. We'll have to go back to my parents' house and tell them the truth."

Their new commitment to each other had slipped through her fingers like pieces of shattered crystal.

SASHA SLAMMED a flat palm on the kitchen table. "By God, Sly, I know something's wrong! Just spit it out!"

Sly leaned on the table with both hands, dropping his head. His voice was barely audible when he spoke. "Cass and I split up a year ago. After the baby died. We're not married anymore, Grandma. We're divorced."

Sasha's hand went to her mouth. "But you...you still love each other!" Sasha shouted.

"I'm sorry, Grandma," Sly said, with eyes so sad that Cassie knew they would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life. "It's over."

"I can't believe this." Sly's mother bit out the words. "What was the point in keeping it from us?"

"It was too soon after Grandma's heart attack," Sly said quietly. "We wanted to wait until she was stronger."

"Nonsense!" Sasha blurted. "If you kept it a secret it was because *you* couldn't deal with it. Not because of me. If you lied about the breakup, maybe it wouldn't be real. Well, it's real now. Do you both feel better?"

Sly's moist eyes met Cassie's, and they both looked back at Sasha. "No, Sasha," Cassie said. "Would you have preferred that we kept on lying about it?"

"Yes!" Sasha exclaimed. "If it got you back together for a while, yes!" Her face shook harder than usual, and she slammed her hand on the table again. "You buried the baby and all your dreams with it. Is that fair?"

"That's not what we're doing, Sasha," Cassie choked, wiping away her tears.

Sasha shoved back her chair. "If you can't be honest with yourselves, then don't even talk to me. I don't want to listen to any more of this nonsense."

Together, they watched her disappear through the swinging door and found that the silence she left in her wake was more painful than had been the final admission.

When the tears and anger were spent and there was nothing more to say, Sly's father drove them to the airport.

*

SLY'S FACE followed Cassie home to haunt her in her sleep, in the faces of crowds she found herself in, in the people she encountered at work. She could not escape it, the feel of his arms, or the whispered promises he'd

made to her before everything fell apart.

She'd made a mistake. He was worth the risk of another pregnancy, if that was what he wanted. It wasn't in her destiny to stop loving him.

The Sunday sky was overcast with dark clouds that smothered the light of the sun, the way they had done each day for the two weeks since Cassie had left Langston.

Turning down the sidewalk that led to her apartment building, Cassie wished for Monday morning so that she could go to work.

As she approached the stairwell she saw, through the wrought iron steps, the dark form of a man sitting at the foot of the stairs. His head and shoulders were bent.

"Sly!"

He stood up slowly. "It's Sasha," he said quietly, and instantly a surge of panic rose within her. "She's in the hospital."

His eyes were grieving, and Cassie couldn't help sliding her arms around him in a silent plea for assurance. He answered by clinging to her. "We have to go to her," he said dismally. "Will you go home with me, Cass?"

"Of course I'll go," Cassie said, reluctantly letting go of him. "Give me ten minutes to go up and get my things together."

Sly had chartered a plane, and they sat aboard it holding hands as if letting go of each other would mean letting go of Sasha. When they landed in Langston they rented a car and drove straight to the hospital where Sasha had been admitted.

SLY TOOK HER hand and led Cassie to Sasha's room, where they found his

mother asleep in a visitor's chair. Without disturbing her, they stood on either side of the old woman. "Grandma?" Sly whispered, stroking the coarse gray hair.

The little woman under the sheets didn't move. Her breathing was shallow. Cassie leaned toward her. "Sasha, it's us. We're worried about you." Tears crept into her eyes.

Sly mumbled an expletive. "I'll never forgive myself."

Cassie straightened, her attention now solely on Sly. "Don't do that to yourself, Sly," she said in a broken voice. "If I hadn't been so selfish, so afraid—I'm not ready to let you go, Sly." New hope swelled in her heart and spilled out of her eyes. "Oh, Sly. If only there were another chance for us. I'm so afraid. But being careful means losing you. And I don't think I can stand that again."

Sly made no effort to speak. He just stood against the rail of Sasha's bed, gazing at Cassie as if he wasn't sure he had heard what she'd said.

Sasha's trembling hand balled into a fist on her chest, and suddenly she flung it out to the side and hit Sly in the stomach. "Answer her!" she cried in a hoarse voice.

"Sasha!" Cassie cried, wiping the tears away as Sly stepped back, stunned.

Martha woke up and sprang to her feet. "Sasha! Oh, thank God!"

"Not now, Martha," the old woman said impatiently. She turned back to Sly, pulling herself up to face her grandson. "This girl just told you she loves you and wants to come back to you."

Sly's eyes were on Cassie. "No, I didn't hear her say she loves me."

Sasha muttered something at the ceiling, then turned back to Cassie. "Spell it out, child. He needs to hear it straight out."

Cassie's eyes were smiling, though they were still welled with tears. "You were faking, weren't you, Sasha?"

"Never mind!" Sasha croaked. "Do I look like a dying woman? Tell him, Cassie!"

"I love you, Sly," Cassie said, new tears springing in her green eyes. Sly's arms came around her, clinging so tightly that she thought her bones would crush, but the sacrifice would have been worth it.

"Finally," Sasha exclaimed, knocking at the bedrail to move it. "Now get out of here and talk it out."

Martha rushed to her side then, and Sasha pushed her hands away. "Oh, just help me out of this bed so I can get home and rest. All these people poking and blubbering over me..."

Cassie turned back to the bed. "Should we tell the doctor that you're all right after all?"

Sasha waved a dismissing hand. "He's so smart, let him figure it out for himself," she said with a half grin. "Let him think he cured me. Now go! And when I see you two again I don't want to hear any more of this divorce nonsense. I'd hate to have to die to get you two back together!"

THE HOUSE was empty except for Cassie and Sly, who stared at each other as if the moment of reckoning had come.

"Now," Sly began in a soft, anxious voice, sliding onto the kitchen counter and pulling Cassie between his knees. "About what you said in Grandma's room—I need to hear it again."

Cassie couldn't hide the warm rush of feeling on her face. "How could you not know that I love you?" she asked. "I've spent the last two weeks crying my heart out for losing you again."

A frown knitted his brows. "You didn't lose me," he said. "You practically sent me on my way."

"I didn't want to," she said. "Sly, have you ever been so afraid of something that even thinking about it tore you inside out?"

Sly watched her for a moment, then dropped his eyes to the counter. "Yes," he said, finally. "I feel that way every time I think of the possibility that I'll have to go on without you." He brought his eyes back to hers. "All I want is a future with you and the children you can give me."

Cassie shook free of his hands and clutched her head. "Don't you understand? I'm afraid of having another failed pregnancy!" As a jagged sigh tore through his chest, she whispered, "I don't think I can do it again. And I can't deprive you of the family you want."

"Deprive me?" he repeated. "Cass. I don't *have* to have kids. All I want is *you*."

His arms were around her, and his voice came in a whisper against her forehead. "All I want is to love you. I don't care about kids if I can't have you. You're the only woman I've ever loved, Cassie. Can't you understand that?"

Cassie looked into his eyes, so intense, so painfully honest. "Yes," she whispered.

"Then it's settled. After we re-marry, am I moving to New York, or are you moving to Chicago?"

"I'll move right away," Cassie said, wiping back her tears. "I hate my apartment, anyway."

"Thank God you didn't say it would take time to arrange." Sly sighed, slinging an arm under her knees and lifting her. "I'm not good at reading between the lines."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked as he pushed the kitchen door open with his back.

"To our room," he whispered, "where I can live out some of these wild dreams that have kept me from getting any rest for the past two weeks."

Cassie nuzzled Sly's neck, and he moaned under his breath as he carried her up the stairs.

There, he took her with desperate, welcome force, drawing her with him down the rapids of desire, snatching the world from beneath her as they whirled through a trembling, vibrant adventure that would bind them for life or do them in. Gasping for breath, she clung to him for better or for worse, knowing when she released him that he would anchor her for the rest of her life.

*

APRIL SUN bathed the hospital room in golden color, and Cassie smiled at her husband. The wonder and joy of what they had just done together was greater than her fatigue. Sly had helped her through what she had feared more than death.

He was cradling the baby. He held her like a fragile treasure that might break. "Look at her, Cass. She looks just like you. Red hair, and that cute little nose..."

"Let me see," Cassie said, pulling herself up in bed. Carefully, Sly laid her in Cassie's arms.

"What I've always wanted," he whispered over the baby as he sat on the edge of the bed. "A little duplicate of you. She's perfect."

Cassie held out a finger for the tiny little hand to grab and pull into her mouth. "The next one will look like you," Cassie said with the deepest feeling of serenity she had felt in months.

Sly's eyes left the baby and lingered on his wife's face. "The next one, Cass? You really mean that?"

She looked at Sly, who was studying her eyes. "I mean it, Sly. I'm not afraid anymore."

He kissed her over the baby, his fingers gently molding her smooth cheekbones.

A commotion in the hall drew them apart, and they both turned toward the door.

"I don't have germs!" a hoarse, raspy voice was saying. "That baby wouldn't be here if it weren't for me! They even named her after me! She's my great-granddaughter, young lady," Sasha was shouting to the nurse. "And I'm going to see her or die trying!"

"You'd better go tell them to let her in before she fakes a heart attack," Cassie laughed.

Sly beamed and pressed a kiss on Cassie's lips again. As he rushed for the door, he glanced heavenward, the most delightful grin on his face. "I wonder if it's possible to be happier," he said as he opened the door to share with Sasha the most precious gift they had ever exchanged. The gift of life. The gift of love.



**CAPRICORN December 23-January 22**

Romance and travel are both highlighted, making this an easy and happy period. Relax and enjoy the moment, as you have worked hard to achieve this. Finances will need to be carefully planned, as you may face unexpected expenditure.

**AQUARIUS January 23-February 22**

Glimpses of a brighter future lift your spirits and show you what will be possible. You are on your way to success but the path is not totally straight. Take any knock-backs in stride and do not confuse setbacks with failure. Support will come in an unexpected way.

**PISCES February 23-March 22**

Relationships are highlighted and there could be some painful decisions to be made. Others seem demanding and critical but until you stand your ground and become definite about what you really want, they have no way of knowing your true worth. Toward the end of the month, the dust settles and a more harmonious period begins.

**ARIES March 23-April 22**

Opportunities arise that allow you to relax and have fun. Friends and partners seem happy to go along with your plans, making this a high period of the year with little to spoil the feeling of well-being and happiness that's spilling all around you.

**TAURUS April 23-May 22**

Deal promptly with any problems that present themselves, as it's a good time for patching up differences with those at work or home. A new hobby or interest takes up a lot of your time, but the rewards will be great and could start you thinking about a change in direction.

**GEMINI May 23-June 21**

Relationships may still be a little difficult and now is not the time to ignore demands to explain your plans. In doing so, a clarity will emerge and enable you to know the way forward into a more positive and beneficial period.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



CANCER June 22-July 22

No matter how careful you have been in making plans, it would be unwise to expect everything to go like clockwork. However, by staying flexible there will be benefits, and a person who has seemed out of reach is now totally receptive to your charms.



LEO July 23-August 22

Patience, although not a lion's strong point, is what's needed to help you understand the many paths open to you. There are some golden opportunities on offer, especially on the work front, and a wise choice will also enhance your love life, if you listen to their wishes as well as your own.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

If you approach life honestly, then success can be yours this month. You should be feeling vibrant and social but also full of good ideas. It's a great time to get away. A holiday will prove very enjoyable in more ways than you expected.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

An exciting go-getting month with your ambitions is well within your grasp both in your career and in romance. Now is a good time for tying up legal matters or seeing your bank manager, as finances should be improving.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

An excellent time to take stock of the recent changes and to slow down a little. Once you have considered your position, you will realize that things are even better than you thought. Those close are enjoying your relaxed and expansive mood.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Family ties that you have found almost impossible loosen, allowing you to make a more personal choice regarding your direction over the next few months. Career matters are very well aspected, and now is the time to push yourself forward. The rewards will be greater than you hoped.

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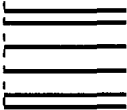
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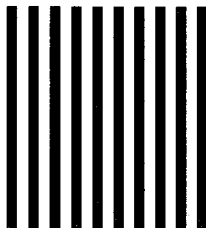


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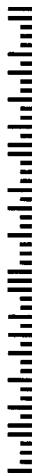


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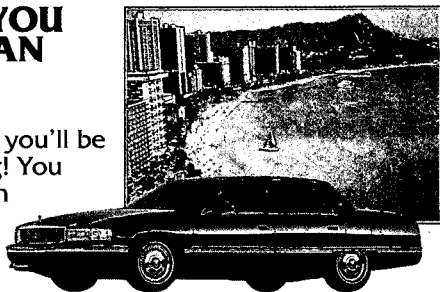
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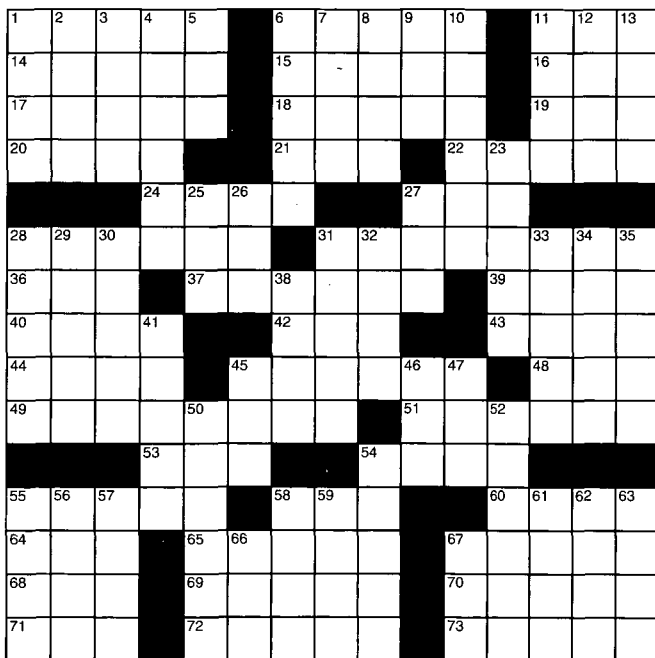
1. Make points
6. Marsh
11. For each
14. Potato, e.g.
15. Wigwam
16. Chopper
17. Island greeting
18. Boxing locale
19. Nothing
20. Mirth
21. Scarlet
22. Dapper
24. Charity
27. Umpire's call
28. Magician's speech
31. Twists
36. Consume
37. Get free
39. Airplane maneuver
40. Prevaricates
42. Hail!
43. Old stringed instrument
44. Glut
45. Program
48. Bo's number
49. Magnifies
51. Certify
53. Water tester
54. Mind
55. Abyss
58. Tease
60. Spool
64. Research room, for short
65. Ascended
67. Tough
68. 100 square meters
69. TV knobs
70. Wrath
71. Seine
72. Binge

DOWN

1. Male deer
2. Select
3. Double-reed woodwind
4. Warm again
5. Epoch
6. Leading actors
7. Existed
8. Mimicked
9. Males
10. Type of butter
11. Gasp
12. Leave
13. Count on
23. Coral island
25. Actor Marvin
26. Wife's title: abbr.
27. "A Chorus Line" song
28. Throb
29. Korean, e.g.
30. Molars
31. Grottoes
32. Store sign
33. Path
34. Lugs
35. Weary
38. Pen
41. Benches
45. Crackerjack pilot
46. Pat gently
47. Had lunch
50. Wanderers
52. Despot
54. Fat
55. Family

56. Rabbit relative
57. Help
58. Bellow
59. Capri or Man
61. "Cogito ____ sum"
62. Paradise
63. Harplike instrument
66. Tear
67. Possesses

Solution on page 69 of this issue.



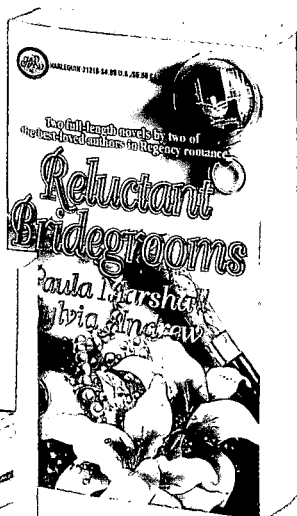
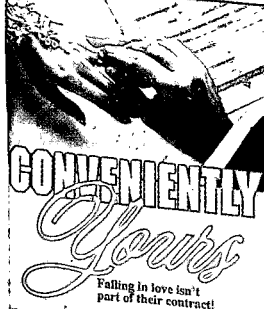
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